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By

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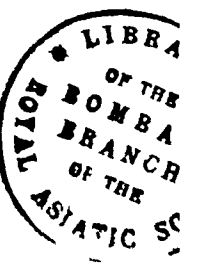
Author of "Seaford's Snake," "The Sign of the Spider," "The River of Unrest," "A Dual Resurrection," etc., etc



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CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
I	From out the Tumult	7
II	Beverstoft Manor	17
III	Wood and Field.	29
IV	The Vicar of Comptonswick	42
V	The Vicar at Beverstoft	52
VI	In the good English Country	62
VII	The Tarred Shed	72
VIII	The Spice Gone Out	83
IX	Back in Stuccodom	94
X	Of some Talk	104
XI	The Clerestory	114
XII	Understanding	125
XIII	The Calf-skin Book	136
XIV	Depression	147
XV	Elation	158
XVI	Disagreement	169
XVII	Discussion	179

CHAP.		PAGE
XVIII	DEAD MAN'S KLOOF	186
XIX	*ITUNZI YENTABA* AND—VIOLET . .	192
XX	ANOTHER CALL	204
XXI	ANOTHER VICTIM	213
XXII	IN A NEW LIGHT	224
XXIII	"QUITE AN OLD FOGEY" . . .	235
XXIV	OF THE WEIRD AND WONDERFUL . .	245
XXV	OF MORE TALK	256
XXVI	"TAKE CARE, VIOLET" . . .	266
XXVII	OF A TERROR	274
XXVIII	AFTERWARDS	285
XXIX	HOME AGAIN	292
XXX	"WORDS OF POWER"	302

CHAPTER I

FROM OUT THE TUMULT

"VOTES for Women!"

The cry rang out in a clear, fluty, girl-voice, from the midst of the closely packed throng. A sea of faces—rough, pallid, grimy faces, male—turned scowlingly towards the interruption, and savage mutterings were heard.

"Votes for Women!"

This time the cry was neither clear nor fluty. It was rather raucous and somewhat ancient. It proceeded from a person of very uncertain age, with a shock of grizzled hair, cut somewhat short, but standing out from beneath a sort of nondescript, half-bonnet, half-hat, form of headgear. Toward this the crowd turned still more savagely, and the snarling mutterings gathered in intensity. There was a heave forward, as though to hustle.

"Votes for Women!"

This time again the clear, fluty girl-note. The very music of it seemed to hold the sea of hostile ugly faces. The smug prominent politician on the im-

provised open-air platform paused in his speech and looked half angrily, half curiously, towards the interruption, then continued. But, hardly had he so done, than again arose the two voices, the young and clear, the elderly and raucous, now combined.

"Votes for Women!"

This time, however, the smug prominent politician on the platform made a gesture of irritability, and his sausage-shaped moustache twisted into something of a peevish sneer. The crowd caught his spirit, and it caught something else. It caught hold of two or three wisps of the elder protester's grey and prominent locks and tweaked them painfully. The younger protester took in the picture of a serried ring of angry cursing faces, the owner of one of which shot out a fist which, but for a rapid movement on her part would have met with no resistance but that afforded by her own dark, oval, and extemely attractive face. As it was, by a rapid movement she avoided this result, though not so completely as to avoid receiving rather a numbing knock on the bone of the right shoulder. And then a new element broke in; a new element, boisterous, unexpected, even as the elements of Nature.

The owner of the fist, whose target was the face of a young and exceedingly attractive woman, met with another fist—far more powerful and better aimed than his own. This met him, with battering-ram effect, and prize-shot precision, bang under the jaw—result temporary insensibility.

But a booing, evil roar went up now from the hemming in ring of pallid, grimy faces. The smug, prominent politician was obliged again to give pause, looking more sneering and irritable than ever. The while the intervener was standing by the two now rather frightened and dazed protesters in such way as to cover them as best he could. This process was effected by a series of surprisingly rapid manœuvres from left to right. Whenever a snarling face came within reach he hit it—hit it with such effect as to send its owner down—acting on the Donnybrook principle of "Whenever you see a head, hit it." And this he most effectually did. In fact he moved first to one side, then to the other, rapping each face in turn as scientifically as a pianist would rap the keys of his instrument. In no time he had cleared a complete ring.

But this was bound to be only temporary. The crowd was not merely hundreds but thousands strong, though there was that slight chance which was favourable, that the occurrence took place at the back of it, and therefore near the outside fringe. A roar that would have been positively appalling to any one listening in cold blood went up, and there was a surge forward.

"Get back, you blackguards," cried this Homeric performer, smiting hard the face nearest to him. "Get back, you infernal cowards. I'm not a Suffragist myself, but I'll be damned if I'm going to stand by and see women hit and mauled about

by a pack of jackals that are supposed to be men. That's not my form. Ah—you would, would you? Take that."

"That" represented another battering-ram lunge, which sent a prominent factor staggeringly stupid, and demoralized those who were pressing on with him.

How this must have ended, it would not have been hard to say, for what can one man do against thousands? But Fortune is popularly supposed to favour the brave—not that it does, but nursery proverbs are not lightly to be upset. Anyhow there was a stir behind where the crowd was thinnest, and a strong body of the county constabulary, specially told off for the occasion in view of potentialities, came wedging its way through the mass of excited humanity, to the theatre of disturbance.

"Right oh!" exclaimed the first intervener, seizing the now thoroughly frightened females by an arm apiece, and his voice not betraying the relief he really felt. "Now you two come along straight to my car, and I'll get you miles away from this in half a shake. I say, Inspector, can your men keep this scum back till the ladies are safe? Then I'll come back and help you, and welcome."

"Yes, sir. But you see, there'll have to be some names and addresses taken over this, and——"

"How the devil can I give you names and addresses in the middle of this swarm of howling savages?" cut in the other, testily. "My car's at *The Timber Ark*—I'll leave my card there."

But before the inspector could answer, things happened. Stones began to hurtle hard and heavily, and the crowd, while now keeping a respectful distance, still showed a desire to follow up these—comparatively few. But the constables had drawn their truncheons and looked formidable enough to produce a temporarily restraining effect.

This did not last, however. One section of the mob surged round to execute a flank movement, so as to cut them off from their way of retreat. *The Timber Ark* stood just on the outskirts of the town, and in the very gates of the stable yard, a large powerful car was standing, the chauffeur by it, and all ready. The chauffeur was a sharp, shrewd fellow, and knowing his master well, had sized up the situation when he spotted the latter some little way off, in the midst of a group of constables, also the threatening, on-pushing crowd.

"Now, ladies, in you get. No time to bother about belongings wherever they are. We've got to clear out of this—and mighty sharp."

There was a rush now forward. The bellowing, excited mob saw that its intended victims—a precious tough "victim" one of them had already shown himself, by the way—were going to escape, and shouting obscenities, and pausing to pick up stones, it ran on. But just a minute too late. The force of constables left behind to keep it back, had given it their fair share of trouble, and the big car went snorting and hooting out on to the broad high

road. Whether it exceeded speed limit or not, the sworn and paid guardians did not trouble—perhaps two or three discs which shone yellow in the hand of the Inspector had made them oblivious of such trifles—but we should not like to say how many miles an hour had slipped before a very few minutes had placed it far beyond earshot of all the recent hullabaloo.

At this point the two ladies in the tonneau began to wonder—their opportune rescuer had taken the chauffeur's place, and was certainly going at a speed which should have earned for him a richly merited £10 fine—began to wonder what on earth was going to happen next; where they were bound for, and when their said opportune rescuer was going to suggest to them how he could suit their convenience by setting them down somewhere.

"If it hadn't been for him we should have been killed," said the younger.

"So we should, my dear," was the answer. "And I think I am as it is."

"What? Why?——" noting a dizziness in the other's voice. "Why, you haven't been struck?"

"Haven't I? A stone hit me on the head—just as the police came to the rescue. I didn't feel it at the time, but—I do now. Things seem to be going round. Oh no. I don't want to faint. That's foolish—idiotic—but——!" And the poor thing fell backwards against her younger companion.

The latter lifted up her voice, the same clear, fluty voice that had raised the current war cry in the arena of strife. Through the thunder and whirr of the powerful, rushing machine it was some time before she could make herself heard. Then the car stopped. Its owner, turning over the wheel to the chauffeur, came round to the tonneau.

"My aunt is fainting," said the girl. "She got hit on the head with a stone; didn't feel it at the time, but now——"

"Oh yes. Brandy. I never travel without it, in case of accidents."

In a moment he had dived into some recess and produced a large handsome, and withal eminently business-like flask.

"Here we are," he said. "Now, madam, try a little of this. It'll keep you up, and we shall soon be home now."

In the middle of her ministrations to the older woman the girl found herself wondering—indeed crowding in a whole world of speculation. "Shall soon be home now." Whither were they bound? They had been hustled into this conveyance, by a totally unknown stranger, obeying him blindly, helplessly and confidingly—and he, Man the Oppressor —had whirled them away at lightning pace, Heaven only knew whither. He had plucked them by sheer strength and science out of what she now recognized to be a ghastly form of peril, the best side of which might have meant that they could only have

escaped it mauled, disfigured for the rest of their lives—and she was young—but for him.

But the rough and ready remedy revived the sufferer, for the time being at any rate, and when their strange rescuer had jumped back to his seat in front, and the car was thundering on its way again, the girl found herself once more speculating as to the strangeness of the situation. She could hear him talking in a sort of angry undertone to the chauffeur, but not *at* that functionary. She could even overhear more than one word, not of a strictly parliamentary nature, and she guessed he was giving a narrative of what had happened. She remembered his declaration of non-sympathy with the Cause—the sacred Cause—when he had so masterfully and scientifically effected their rescue, but under the circumstances even this did not prejudice her against him, as it invariably would have done against any other male who should have dared to utter it in her presence, and still more she wondered; and the strangeness of the adventure began to press home more and more upon her. And she did not know in the least where they were going, nor had there been any time for explanations or mutual self-introductions.

But what she did realize was a very real sense of safety and absolute security, and this in the reaction following on the hideous turbulent centre of violence into which her enthusiasm had so foolishly led her—though she would not quite admit the qualifying

adjective even now—was restful indeed. It did not matter much where they were bound for. All would come right. With the man in front at the wheel—the metaphorical wheel, not that of the car—she felt somehow that anything wrong was bound to come right. So she soothed the wounded one in the fray, who lay back in the throes of a splitting headache, and the while it had grown dusk and the lamps had been set in full glare.

It seemed as if they had gone through about a county and a half, as the huge, powerful machine went rushing on. Fields, hedgerows, became still more dim, and the loom of black fir coverts shut out the sky on either side of the road. The evening had become lowering, and a spot or two of rain began to fall. The car swerved suddenly at a tangent, and she could make out that they were going at a slackened pace up what looked like a drive. Then it halted, buzzing, in front of a door, leading apparently into a not very well-lighted hall; and as she descended, she could make out that this was the entrance to a low, irregular house with high gables, pointed against the lighter murk of the sky.

The crunch and buzz of the car brought more light upon the entrance. A middle-aged woman stood at the door to receive them.

"Take these ladies in, and take care of them," said their new host, with characteristic abruptness to the housekeeper. "One has met with an accident. They can't go on to-night. Have the best

bedrooms done up, sharp as possible." Here the younger of the pair cut in.

"Excuse me, but—er—is there no way we could get on? We couldn't think of trespassing on your kindness, and——"

"No. There's no way. The best thing you can do is to get your aunt to bed. I'll see that you have everything you want. A crack on the head is no joke, as I know by hard experience—no pun intended—and requires taking care of."

Curiously enough any further remonstrance seemed to die in her throat. The dictatorial brusqueness of the speaker seemed to carry her away. The girl turned, and giving a supporting arm to her relative who was swaying in a sort of half-dazed, half-fainting manner, she followed the housekeeper, who was already impliedly beckoning them.

"You are very, very kind," was all she said, over her shoulder.

But her strange entertainer hardly heard. He was already on his way back to the door to give orders to the chauffeur to drive down to the village, and bring the doctor back with him at once.

CHAPTER II

BEVERSTOFT MANOR

THE morning sun shone generously in through the open window of a typical "den"—it would have been called a study in the old days, for the good and sufficient reason that nobody ever dreamed of entering it for the purpose of "studying" anything. Its main ingredients consisted of pipe-racks and cigar-boxes, guncases and fishing-rods, waders and other footgear of less amphibious nature, spurs and hunting-crops, a row of the Badminton series, Surtees and other more or less sporting novels, and a large writing-table so piled up with miscellaneous papers and correspondence that its owner had to sort of bore a hole between each heap to find space wherein to write any necessary missives that should perforce in due time tend to inflate the latter.

It likewise shone in upon two occupants of the same, one with an old and seasoned pipe between his teeth, the other not. Said the last—

"I'm afraid you've let yourself in for more than

you bargained, Averno. The lady can't be moved. It looks like a touch of concussion."

"The devil it does? Well, I don't care a curse. There's plenty of room for them, and I've told old Blondell to look after them as if they were my own kin. She'll do it too, or I'll know the reason why."

The doctor gave a chuckling, dry sort of cough.

"No doubt about that," he said. "You probably would. I never saw your like for indulging in eccentrics. Here you start off, on an ordinary aimless run on that infernal murder car of yours—I don't care whether you like the word or not, you've nearly murdered my dogs at least three times of late—and then you sail in at a business with which you have no earthly concern, and haul back a brace of savage Suffragettes on the war-path, one of them with a damaged skull—and send for me to tinker her up. Wish they'd all got damaged skulls. They have got cracked ones," he added sourly.

"No—no. That's not fair," laughed the other. "I don't believe in that sort of thing any more than you do, but I do admire pluck—possibly because I haven't got much myself. But the way those two stood up in the middle of a crowd of rotten scum who'd knock even you or me on the head for half a crown, spelt pluck. So there you are."

"Spelt skittles," snorted the doctor. "They

reckoned they'd only got to pretend to faint if the worst came to the worst. That's the size of it, you can swear."

"Size of it or not, one of 'em's a devilish pretty girl. By the way, how long do you think it'll take to tinker her up?"

"Which? The 'devilish pretty girl?'"

"Don't be an ass. The old 'un, of course."

"H'm!" drily. "Can't say offhand."

"Oh well, it doesn't matter. But the rum part of it is we none of us know who the devil the other is. I didn't bother last night to go into explanations, and they didn't give any or ask any. The old lady looked as if the sooner she got to bed the better. And I haven't seen either this morning as yet."

"You were both right there. Well, I've told Mrs. Blondell exactly what to do, so you needn't worry. Leaves on longer than last year. Make it late for the pheasants," he broke off. And then both men launched into shooting "shop" and the "brace of savage Suffragettes on the warpath" were clean forgotten—for the time. Then the doctor went out and mounted his waiting dog-cart in front of the door.

Philip Averno was a crank, at least so his kinsfolk and acquaintance said—he had not many of the former, and detested pretty well all that he had—a not uncommon state of things. He had plenty of the latter, and did not mind them—those of them,

that is, who were not too big fools to recognize that it is better for a man to go his own way, all being equal and he is able to do so, *bien entendu*. And to the ordinary and recognized rule of thumb way of looking at things he certainly was. For instance, he cared nothing at all for conventionalities; the very fact of his having brought home with him two utter strangers of the other sex, and not troubling his head to find out who they were or where they belonged, was only one case in point. Then too, when his friend the doctor had broken it to him that he might be under an obligation to keep them, or one of them at any rate, beneath his roof for an indefinite time—that again did not bother him in the least. So it was with every consideration. He never let anything bother him. He simply went straight ahead. There had been times in his life when this did not hold good; now he had brought himself into the stage where in it did. He had a curious slap-dash way of communing with himself out loud. Twice he was nearly the cause of summarily executing two old gentlemen on the "island" at the Piccadilly end of Hamilton Place, by exercising this habit, and thus causing them to jump out into the traffic under the impression that a dangerous lunatic was standing immediately behind them. But he certainly was an eccentric, though a very healthy and sporting sample of the breed.

The sweep of landscape in front of Beverstoft Manor was a bold and picturesque one; in the purple

richness of late May or early June, or the sensuous misty sun-gilt haze of early autumn, a lovely one. Now it was the latter. Great stretches of gold-brown bracken, with the sun slanting full upon the red smooth stems of Scotch firs, and vivid gleam of yellow mustard fields, and the darker coverts of pine plantings, and the now fading tasselled green of the larch —then, too, the sweet fresh exhilaration of a wind from the North Sea, all this was good to the eyes and the nerves and the senses on a golden cloudless morning. Philip Averno, strolling out after the doctor had gone, realized all this—realized it to the very full. There was a vein in his eccentric nature which fell in with such influences while gusty and slap-dash, and "push-through-everything" in the ordinary affairs of life. This place of his was of no great size or importance, and did not bring him in very much, still it was his, and he loved it. At any rate it brought him in sufficient for his needs; amply sufficient, for his needs were not great, and he was content.

He had known what it is not to be content. He had roughed it in all sorts of queer wild places, with no prospect of ever doing anything else for the rest of his natural life, and then a sort of miracle—what he would have called "a miracle of grace," though it had involved the sudden extinction of three lives—had he known the term, had unexpectedly brought him back to the Homeland, and placed him in possession of what would have been to him the ideal

of any man's life; a sufficiency of income, and a ready to hand facility for nearly every kind of sport. And he dearly loved the gun.

Now as he turned towards the house again, the moist thick mists of the early September morning were curling back over the exquisite tints of the changing autumnal woods. The last thing he thought of was the vision which confronted him at a turn in the woodland path which brought him out in an open meadow, on which the white hoarfrost of the night before still hung in glittering facets where the sun had not yet penetrated. Coming along the meadow path was a girl, rather a tall girl, with oval face and lustrous eyes. A soft fleece of a scarf lay upon her dark profusion of hair, but he noticed the erect elasticity of her gait and poise. In a moment they met.

"Good morning. How is your aunt?" he began, with characteristic abruptness. "The doctor tells me she can't be moved—can't be bothered, in fact. Well, there's no earthly reason why she should. There she is—she's comfortable, isn't she?"

"Why yes, of course. But——"

"Well, there's no 'but.' That's all we have to do with."

"Well but—Mr. Averno, there is a 'but.'"

"Yes? Where does the 'but' come in?"

The girl looked at him, and her brows slightly contracted. Here was a situation clean outside her young experience. For instance he had made no

sort of inquiry as to her—to their—identity. That was about as unusual as anything could be. He had not even offered to disclose his own—his name she had got, of course, from the housekeeper, also the locality in which they had so strangely found themselves.

"Well, the 'but' comes in this way. Here we are, trespassing upon your kindness, and I'm afraid, from what the doctor says, my aunt can't be moved for a day or two."

"Lord, Lord! What *does* that matter?" he interjected rather impatiently. "I only hope she has suffered no real injury. Those degraded brutes! I wish I had mauled some more of them."

The girl's eyes kindled—perhaps the recollection of the fine handplay appealed to the savage, underlying every woman's nature, or was there something in the individual man before her—Man the Oppressor? But she answered—

"You stood by us splendidly, Mr. Averno. You were perfectly magnificent. As you say, I wish you had smashed more of those filthy brutes. But at any rate you smashed your full share of them, more than the full share that any ordinary man would have borne."

By rights Averno ought to have purred. But he did not. For a rare time in his life he almost felt foolish. He answered—

"Well, all the better if I did—on your account. I don't necessarily agree with your campaign, Miss—

Miss—By jingo, I find I don't in the least know your name."

The girl's smile broke into a ripple. She had been trying whether she should make him introduce himself before she introduced herself. Now she had won, but she was very gracious in her small triumph.

"Passinghame. Eva Passinghame," she answered. "We live at Comptonswick, by Burbleton. Do you know it?"

"Oh yes. It's not far."

"Not far? Why it's a county and a half away, at least."

"That's nothing. If you had had to negotiate the distances I have you'd think it a mere inch. Well, I suppose you broke away for a little fresh air and all that. Come along then, I can show you some of the prettiest and jolliest corners of the place."

He turned back as if to lead the way, and she followed. She found herself whimsically wondering how he would have looked, or what he would have said or done, if she had not followed. The way in which he seemed to take everything for granted appealed to the humorous side of her. For instance, there was no conventional "May I show you, etc." about the suggestion. That sheer, brusque, "Come along then" seemed to size up the man. And ardent Suffragette, and "women's rights" type as she was, it was not displeasing to her.

"It is rather beautiful here," she said, glancing from side to side of the woodland path they had

now struck into. Golden-brown bracken and thick bramble undergrowth lay between the red stems of smooth Scotch firs, and the fragrant moisture of the autumn air was reflected in a hundred subtle scents from moss and leaf, from fungus and tree trunk. Now and then a cock pheasant, resplendent in blue and burnished bronze, would spring up with a rush and a whirl right at their feet, and glide squawking away, the white ring upon his neck standing out clear and distinct; or a rabbit would scuttle across the ride, or a couple of squirrels scratching their way up a tree stem would pause to chirk angrily and impudently from the safety of the first bough.

"Oh, yes. It's all right," he answered. "Do you know, I like all this sort of thing. I don't only keep bird and animal life to shoot. I like to go and look at it, I spend hours in the coverts by myself; sometimes a whole night when there's a full moon, watching things, and their habits. My keeper thinks me more than half a lunatic because I won't allow any hawks or owls or jays or squirrels to be shot, and as for a trap—I won't have such an infernal barbarous monstrosity on the place."

"Fancy that!"

"Exactly. Yes, I know what you were thinking—that Mere Man is always a barbarous blood-shedding beast, and that gentle Woman, who raises Cain in the streets, and bangs policemen in the eye, is—Oh there now, steady on. I didn't mean to become polemical. Well—never mind."

Under ordinary circumstances his listener would have stiffened, and the light of battle would have shone in her eyes. But somehow, to this particular speaker, no such result responded. Not only that. He had not apologized, as he should have done, as she would have required anybody else to have done. All he said was, "Never mind."

"Come along this way," he went on. "I'll show you a jolly bit. See now where the mere begins to sparkle through the tree stems."

There was a glint of silver here and there, where the sun-touched water began to show itself. Then they came out on the flag-fringed, irregular circumference of a large, long sheet of water. Coots and dab-chicks were navigating it without apparent fixity of purpose, and a large heron flapped up cautiously, uttering a croak of lazy alarm.

"That's another specimen I won't have exterminated," he went on. "They are so jolly ornamental, and I like wild life, all round me. But I suppose this is a bore to you. You're stuffed up with 'Votes for Women' and all that."

"Now why drag that in?"

"Drag it? I never drag anything in. I only say what I think."

"'M—yes, you do that," she answered, with a merry ripple in the dark eyes.

"Well, why not?"

"Why not. Because—well, sometimes it would

be rather inconvenient if everybody said what they thought."

"Of course. I don't mean it in that way. I mean in ordinary ways. Why should one hum and haw because you think somebody else isn't going to agree with you. Of course I wouldn't romp over any one's pet corns for the world."

The girl laughed outright.

"Really you are what the French call an 'original,' Mr. Averno. No, I believe you would draw the line at that."

"Of course I should. Which reminds me, we are stretching out this stroll a bit, and I shouldn't be surprised if you were wondering when on earth you were going to get back. Well, *I* always lunch at about one—you are not obliged to, if you would care to have it at any other time—with your aunt perhaps. But if you would care to join me I should be very glad. I am a lonely man, but still I am more or less used to it."

"I shall be delighted to join you, Mr. Averno," answered the girl, with a sparkle of amusement in her dark eyes. "My aunt ought really to be kept very quiet, and the less I am about her the less she will talk."

"Well that's sensible. So we'll stroll back."

He took her round by another way. It was equally beautiful; the path ran by a slow-flowing stream where here and there they had to jump a small, but knee-deep dyke, running through the rich,

low-lying meadows into it, and the green plover circled overhead making a perfectly unreasonable and clamorous racket. She was thinking that of all the unconventional oddities she had ever encountered this one was clean outside her experience. He was treating her as though she were an expected and invited guest, just putting in her stay, and this time yesterday they had never seen or heard of each other in their lives. But as she looked at the long, lean, symmetrical form, and remembered the hard execution of the day before, she came to the conclusion that this sort of "oddity" was distinctly good, and worthy of the approval of even the most advanced striver on behalf of The Cause.

CHAPTER III

WOOD AND FIELD

"THERE'S one thing I like about you Suffragists," said Philip Averno, as they rose from lunch, "you are so jolly unconventional. You treat the ugly sex—well, as you ought to treat it, in private life, that is. Now for instance, we are going to have another jolly good walk round together, and you say you are going to enjoy it. That's right. I'm sure I am. It isn't often I get anybody to take me for one. I've got feminine relatives of course, but they bore me when they come down here. One begins questing after golf, as though that were the aim and end-all of everything; another says she's ordered to lie down for an hour and a half—during the best part of the day, mind you. Or another wants to bring some old crock along to make a third—and a bore."

"Well? What's the point?" asked the girl, still with that mischievous gleam of amusement in her eyes.

"The point is that *you* don't do any of these things,

raise any of these silly objections. And we never knew of each other's existence this time yesterday."

"Well, but haven't you got *male* relatives who don't? Man the superior, you know?" always with deepening mischief.

"Bah! They're the worst of the lot. You know —'Awful sorry, old chap, but I can't walk very far I'm afraid. My back, don't cher know.' Or— 'Beastly fag hoofing it about for no object. Want to keep fit for to-morrow's shoot'—and so on."

"Yes. You're certainly giving the dominant sex a bad character," she answered, still bubbling with amusement.

"Well, I didn't mean to do that. But in other countries I've been in it seems to be different. Why even when I get up a shoot here I have to collect a cluster of Johnnies who seem to look upon it as rather doing me a favour that they come at all. Want to M.C. my arrangements too; to tell me what time I'm to start, how long is to be allowed for lunch, and all that. They might as well save themselves the trouble though."

"That I'm perfectly sure they might," was the answer.

"Yes. I've got certain ideas of my own—my neighbours call them erratic—but one of them is that I don't believe in making a toil of a pleasure. Now the hidebound tradition around me I find is that most people do. Shall we start?"

"I'm quite ready."

Halfway down the drive an idea suddenly struck Averno—hit him hard, in fact. He stopped short.

"I say; I was clean forgetting. What are you going to do—er—how are you going to manage—about clothes? You've only got those you came here in."

Eva Passinghame laughed—laughed outright, and so heartily.

"Oh Great Oppressor-Man!" she said. "Your unrivalled housekeeper thought of that the moment we were awake, and sent a wire directly the doctor said my aunt couldn't be moved. We shall get a fresh relay by to-morrow morning at latest." Then becoming serious. "But, Mr. Averno, I don't know what to say about our inflicting ourselves upon you like this."

"Then don't say anything. *You* don't seem much of an infliction anyhow. What sort of infliction is it that I am groaning under to-day? You are doing your best towards making it rather delightful to a lonely man. So there you are."

The girl was puzzled. His slap-dash inconsequence of speech would every now and then give way to a certain suspicion of pathos, as it had done now. She felt she could take him more easily in the other mood.

She stepped out beside him, looking trim and erect in her tailor-made, sportsmanlike costume. The air and exercise brought a suffusing glow to the dark oval face and a sparkle to the bright eyes. He,

noting this, was thinking of that abominable situation of barely twenty-four hours ago, and what a blessed thing it was that his hard-acquired science should have been in all human probability the means of saving her from serious injury, and perhaps permanent disfigurement at the hands of the rough and utterly unchivalrous crowd. But—what the devil business had she to thrust herself into such a dangerous muddle? It was like looking for bother, anyway.

"Oh well," she answered. "It's very nice of you to say so, but I am enjoying myself intensely. I love this quiet, solemn, woodland country, and I so seldom get an opportunity of seeing any of it, My father is vicar of a parish on the outskirts of a hideously ugly town, with hideously ugly country for miles and miles around, all turnip fields, and ploughed fields and chalk.. There's no one there either, to swap an idea with, so you can imagine it gets on one's nerves very considerably at times—in fact more and more."

"More and more?"

"Yes. So life is a pretty drab affair."

"Hence the enthusiasm for The Cause. Makes an outlet?"

"Now, now," and she held up a warning finger. "You must 'keep off the grass.'"

"Oh, all right. Don't you worry about that. Look, here is my decoy," he broke off as they came out on the further end of the mere, where a sluggish stream, now rather full from recent rains, wound

itself in. "I can stand here at sunset on hard evenings in winter, and bag half a dozen pair of duck in an hour, when they come flighting over. It's lovely sport. Get them against the sky, you know."

"Oh yes. Do all men exist for the purpose of killing units of the minor creation?"

"That sounds rather pedantic—or academic—and doesn't ring right," he answered. "Would you rather that 'all men' were bookish animals with spectacles and large heads and small everything else, or that they were keen on clean healthy sport. Come now?"

"I'm sure I wouldn't have preferred it yesterday," she said decisively, and with a quick bright smile. It was his turn to feel foolish.

"So—you are a parson's daughter?"

"Well—why not?"

"I don't know. Only I should never have guessed it."

"Why?"

"Well—I don't know."

Then they both burst out laughing.

"Parsons' progeny are proverbially supposed to be scamps," she went on. "I suppose my share of scampery comes out in—well, what you found me at yesterday."

"Oh then—you only run it as a form of scampery? A sort of an outlet, as I said before."

"I didn't say that."

"Look—Do you see that tarred shed?" he

broke in, with apparent inconsequence. "Come and look at it."

On the edge of the wood stood an old shed—with a yard attached. The gates of the yard had long since disappeared, so too had part of the palings.

"But—what about it? It's like any other tarred shed."

"Well, come and look at it, and I'll tell you."

They crossed the disused yard, and entered the shed. Just as she had said, it was like any other shed. A couple of beams spanned the spring of the roof, and there was an ancient and mouldy feeding trough on three legs, standing in a corner.

"Here—come here, Stirrup," ordered Averno, apostrophizing the little Clumber spaniel, who had accompanied them.

But the dog remained outside the yard gateway and whined. No amount of coaxing voice or threatening voice would move him over its portal. He simply lay there and crouched, and wriggled, and whined.

"What's the joke?" said Eva Passinghame, looking forth in amazement. "He won't come."

"No, he won't, and that *is* the joke. I've never been able to induce him to."

"But—why?"

"I don't know. But this place is supposed to be badly haunted, and they say animals can see more than we can."

"Haunted?" and an instinctive glide to the outer air accompanied the ejaculation.

"Yes. Years and years ago a chap was found hanging to one of those beams. He'd hung himself I believe. Now the idea is if you come here after dark you find him hanging to it any night. I forget which beam it's supposed to be. By the way, I believe he's supposed to have murdered another Johnny here in this very shed, and buried him under the floor, but that may be only a rustic yarn for purposes of piling up the agony."

She started instinctively—and made a move towards the outer air again.

"How horrible! And—do you believe that?"

"'Votes for Women,'" answered the other, slily.

"No, but—it's really rather uncanny. And the dog won't come in."

"He never will. That's the rum part of it."

"Well, that looks as if there *was* something in it." And she gazed up at the roof with rather a horror-struck expression.

The sun had gone in, and a thick overcast of cloud had come up, throwing the place into semi-gloom in the middle of the afternoon. A spot or two of rain plashed heavily down upon the roof.

"Going to have a shower," pronounced Averno. "We'd better wait till it's over."

"Oh no. Let's get out into the open, rain or not. I begin to feel a—what do you call it—in-

fluence ? in this place. I don't mind the rain—and we can get under a tree."

" ' Votes for Women,' " quoted the other again, drily.

And just then, without the slightest warning a perfect deluge of rain poured down, lashing up the ground into mud splashes and causing the rotten roof to shiver with the impact, while a drip drip from half a dozen leakages caused the inmates hurriedly to shift their positions every now and then. Even the girl's superstitious fit of recoil from the place perforce gave way as an alternative to facing that vehement flood. She noticed, moreover, in spite of it that the little Clumber did not take advantage of their shelter.

But the sudden downpour was not a cold one, and during a lull in it the moist, ferny, mossy scent of the woodland wafted in fresh and fragrant. On this Averno remarked.

" You never get it within a certain radius of London," he said, " and I put the area at where the tree stems cease to be black. Richmond Park is a case in point, and even the wilder end of Kew Gardens is doubtful."

She was thinking how wrapped up he seemed in everything around him. He seemed to have no care for anything outside, no particular interest in passing events, and yet she could not call it " vegetation " if only that the interest, as an interest, was so vivid. During their walk the whole of his conver-

sation had turned on the surroundings, on this or that effect, or this or that vista—where, opening out beyond a foreground of trees, some charming beauty spot in the landscape was eagerly pointed out to her. Even at some little half-overhung pool in the depths of a covert corner, he would stop to point out an effect. Yet, she was not bored—which was strange.

"Don't you paint, Mr. Averno?" she said. "Why, you're simply saturated with the artistic. Surely you do."

"No, strange to say, I don't. You can't improve on Nature, and I prefer to look at it at first hand. Once I booked a chap to come down here and do me some of my pet spots—he wasn't exactly in the first flight in that line, but I'd seen some of his stuff and liked it just as well as the stuff of some of those who were. All right. He did dash me off some of my pet corners—I'll show them you when we get in—no I won't though, for I don't believe in boring anybody. Well, some of them were hardly recognizable. He'd put inarticulate dabs for foregrounds where you'd really see moss or flowers or fern, and when I remarked on it he retorted snuffily airily: 'My dear sir, you see, you don't understand Art.' 'May be,' I answered, 'but I understand Nature.' Well there you are."

She laughed.

"'Snuffily airily' is good. I'll keep that for future use."

"Yes. Haul it in at one of your meetings, eh? By the way, let me know next time you are going to make a speech. I'll come and hear it. Only don't make it to the sort of mob you were in yesterday."

"Oh, I'll let you know," she laughed. "You might come in useful again."

"Now don't keep on harping on that string. It makes one feel rather a fool, don't you know."

"I don't see why it should," she answered, and her tone was serious and quite in earnest. "But if you like, I'll drop it."

"Well—I do like. There's nothing in it, anyway. Now the deluge seems to have cleared off," as a gleam of sickly sunlight struggled through the thick and misty vapour curling up white from the now steaming woods. "We could step out, but I'm afraid you'll find it deucedly wet underfoot."

"Oh, that's nothing. Besides I can change. Do you know, Mr. Averno, I believe you are infecting me with your own fascination for all this," with a comprehensive look around.

"Oh well. Better than kicking up a dust at idiotic political spoutings, anyway, and——"

"Now, now," she interrupted. "You're getting 'on the grass' again. If I am to be restricted as to that other matter, you must keep within bounds on this."

"Oh all right, I don't mind. Here we are at the keeper's," as a clamour of dog voices ran up its gamut a short distance in front.

"What a pretty place," exclaimed Eva, as a snug, picturesque, gabled cottage came in sight. From several ample kennels came a redoubled chorus, then it ceased, and tails were wagging as their owners thrust their noses through the iron bars, soliciting caresses.

"Fine rain, Eccles," said Averno, as that functionary came forth.

"Yes, sir. It dew fare be a middlin' rain."

"Well, we found timely shelter in the tarred shed."

Eva thought this intimation was received with a look of faint surprise, which confirmed the current superstition attached to the place. But her host broke in—

"See that big pheasant pen. I had a pair of young peregrines in it a year or two back—fine pair they were too, weren't they, Eccles? Well, when they were getting full grown they began to mope, so I concluded to turn them loose." Here the listener was aware of a comical grin stealing over the keeper's face. "I suddenly became alive to the enormity of keeping falcons in a cage. I couldn't turn 'em loose here or they'd have been shot to a dead cert—eh, Eccles?" the grin deepened. "So I put them in a cage and took them down to the Yorkshire coast, Flamborough way, where the cliffs drop sheer to the sea for hundreds of feet. There they'd be safe if anywhere, so I turned them loose there."

The girl's eyes widened.

"What? You went all the way to Yorkshire only to turn a couple of birds loose?"

"Of course I did. They'd have been murdered here if I hadn't, and I didn't want that. But the way they shot out over the sea at that height like a couple of arrows. It was worth taking the journey just to see that alone."

She stared.

"Well, you *are* a record," she said, shaking her head, but not disapprovingly. The keeper laughed outright. He, too, had his liking for the wild life of the woods, and was further somewhat unusually free, for one of his calling, from vital prejudice against the predatory side of the said wild life; carrion crows forming the exception, and these he pursued without mercy.

As they talked, on the short homeward way remaining to them, the girl was thinking. That last episode, of the release of the two falcons and all the trouble it had involved, seemed to set a culminating seal upon the character of the man. A curious soft feeling of satisfaction was stealing over her being, and she realized that she had enjoyed this day, roaming by field and wood and water, as she had rarely if ever enjoyed any day before in her life. And yet by no longer than that time yesterday had they so much as seen or heard of each other before in their lives.

The days were drawing in now, and it was dusk when they reached home. She thought how snug

and jolly the firelight looked in the glimpse she caught through the open door of his " den."

' What an awfully nice walk you have taken me, Mr. Averno," she said brightly, " I have enjoyed it so much."

" ' It ? ' Both of them ? "

" Rather. Both of them. I must go upstairs now and look after the patient."

" Yes, yes. Dinner at half-past seven. You'll be there ? "

Was there the faintest tinge of anxiety in the tone. She wondered—then thought there was.

" Certainly, if you haven't had enough of me for one day," she answered, flashing a bright smile back at him as she went upstairs. And Philip Averno got into his favourite armchair, by the fire, and lit pipes, and—thought.

CHAPTER IV

The Vicar of Comptonswick

THE Rev. John Passinghame, D.D., vicar of Comptonswick by Burbleton, crossed the hall from his study to the drawing-room, where his eldest daughter sat by a glowing fire reading a novel. She looked up.

"Now, father, take off your 'thinking cap' when you come in here," she said.

The vicar laughed, and removed his biretta, folding it flat; he had an amiable weakness for wearing it whenever practicable.

"Of course," he answered. "From the academic and parti-sacerdotal to the social but a few oblong tiles intervene. Well, Hermione, what about these two lunatic relatives of yours—of ours? It's nearly feeding-time, and they should be back by now. I say though," anxiously. "They can't have come to grief can they? What if they've made themselves a nuisance and got run in? These rabid Suffragettes, you never know what they'll do next."

"Oh Lord, no. Don't bother about that. Aunt

Caroline knows how to take care of herself; and as for Eva—well, doesn't *she?*"

"There's something in that. But——"

"But—what? They'll only shout 'Votes for Women' two or three times, just to relieve their feelings, and be politely requested to clear."

"Yes, but—if they got obstreperous?" urged the vicar, doubtfully.

"Oh, that's all right. Aunt Caroline isn't taking on any second division or forcible feeding, let alone Eva, if I know the latter," was the reassuring answer. "They'll turn up by any train now, 'crowned with triumph's flushing honours, joy in unison secure,' over the bother they've put some tinpot spouting politician to."

"Hermione, don't be profane," said the vicar, with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Profane? I didn't know that our one and only, and very great, John Mason Neale was 'inspired'—though one might suspect it—nor his translatee either for the matter of that. Never mind. I can't help a quotation when it occurs to me—no matter whom it's out of. See what comes of being a blue stocking, old dad, but Girton hasn't turned me into a Suffragette."

"No, thank God. One's enough in the family."

"And she isn't Girton nor a blue stocking. What about Aunt Caroline though?"

"Oh, she's mad—at her time of life, too! She's old enough to know better. Quite. You young

ones up-to-date, are full of fads and fancies, but she—Faugh!"

"Well, it was Eva who converted her—perverted her, shouldn't it be?"

"Bother, but they ought to be back. It's close on dinner time," went on the vicar, rather anxiously.

"But don't bother, dear. What's the use of it? Here are two full-grown women, exhaustively able to take care of themselves. They may even be stopping the night at Haslet in order mildly to interrupt some other political spouting gathering. They'll be all right."

"Stopping the night? Oh, well, your Aunt Caroline can do as she likes. But Eva's going too far in this business. She'll get herself into a hole one of these days. That's the way with you women. You're utterly lacking in all sense of proportion."

"Go easy. We're not. Am I, for instance—Girton and all?"

"Well, no. *You* are not. But Eva—and your aunt, who's old enough to know better—Faugh! Well we won't wait dinner for them. Women go their own way these days, so we may as well meet them half way and go ours. If they turn up overdue they'll have to take their chance."

"That's all they ask for," answered Hermione, feeling instinctively moved to arms on behalf of her sex.

"Oh is it?" grumbled the vicar. "You'll see what a fuss they'll make when they come in and find

everything swept away. 'Votes for Women' isn't going to comfort them under that."

"I think it is—but never mind. Don't worry, that's the great thing."

"So it is, dear, and you carry out the maxim admirably," answered her father, affectionately. "And it saves a man an awful lot of worry if his womenkind don't worry him. Generally they do."

"Then be thankful yours don't," was the smiling reply.

"So I am. One of them does, all the same."

"No—no. You only think she does."

"Do I. This Suffragist nonsense. What of that?"

"Oh, leave it alone. It'll sizzle, or it won't. Anyway you can't help it, nor can I."

The speaker was a few years older than her sister—whose acquaintance we have already made. She was of a sunny, placid disposition, and of homely tastes, in spite of her time at Girton, to which we have heard her just allude. Without being exactly pretty she was an attractive-looking girl, with nut-brown hair and very blue eyes; and the clear complexion corresponded, also she was of rather large build. But she was the one of the vicar's two daughters who appealed to her father at every turn, whereas the other one, Eva, appealed most to everybody else, especially those of the male persuasion.

Dr. Passinghame was an advanced High Churchman, in fact, a very advanced High Churchman

indeed. His abode and surroundings we have already heard described by his youngest daughter. It was a poor living, impossible to have been held by any one on its sheer income alone. The parish consisted entirely of small shopkeepers and the artisan class, who could not have done anything to augment the income, or next to nothing, with all the will in the world. But they had the will, for the vicar was a zealous man and spared himself not a whit. Moreover, he was that rarity, a judicious man, which went further still. His church was a large, oblong one with a high-pitched roof, and in these days of don't-believe-in-anything, strange to say it was always full, sometimes crowded, and that with both sexes equally. But when you got inside you might think it had escaped notice altogether at the Reformation time, for its incumbent followed the Roman Rite as nearly as it could be grafted on to that fragment of the Act of Uniformity called the Book of Common Prayer.

Once some weedy, pasty-faced youths belonging to a society of sorts in London, and calling themselves by an historically associated name—the owner of which, by the way, would willingly have seen them burnt for the very tenets with which they now associated, and insulted, his name—had come over with the express object of interrupting some especial ceremonial. But they hadn't gone far before they found themselves propelled forcibly to the nearest door and shot out of that. The cere-

monial went on all the same. By which it is manifest that Dr. Passinghame was personally, as well as doctrinally popular.

Personally again, he was a scholarly-looking, elderly man, with a short grey beard, and a sort of clinging glint of humour lurking about the corners of his eyes. He never could resist a joke, even at times when he felt irritable, and there were times when he did. Then an appeal to his sense of humour would set him as right as a tonic, and this mood his eldest daughter, Hermione, thoroughly understood and played up to. There were few women who would have displayed the tact—at any rate, taken the trouble to display it to one so " near home "—yet she did. On the other hand the youngest—Eva—took no trouble to study her father's moods at all. She wasn't going to bother to study any mere Man, as she told herself, and others, contemptuously.

Dinner time came, and the missing ones did not. It went, and the vicar, in spite of his professed philosophical way of taking it, began to feel anxious. Then he grew irritable, and started in to fulminate against feminine fads, and, above all, feminine selfishness. As the evening wore on into bedtime he grew more irritable still. They might have sent a telegram, he declared, if they were going to stay away the night. But—there you are. That was women all over, thinking that a selfish want of consideration for other people was a mark of " progress "—women all over, and Eva especially. Even

his elder daughter's efforts to soothe him were not effectual, and he went to bed in a very bad humour indeed.

But with morning this was destined to become worse, as a telegraph boy met him on his return from early church and handed him a wire.

"Answer, sir?"

"No—no. There you are," to himself, disgustedly, as the boy turned away. "There you are!"

Hermione was looking very cool and fresh as she sat there engineering the complicated ceremonial so dear to her sex under the name of tea making; cool and fresh, and the very incarnation of the soothing. Perhaps for the moment the effect was there. Then the vicar broke out gustily, throwing down the open telegram.

"Here's a holy joke. Look at this. Your aunt and your sister have been playing the idiot at this rotten meeting and got damaged. Of course they have."

"Not Eva?" with a quick dash of anxiety, which was allayed by a swift glance at the message.

"No. Your aunt. Upon my word, I was nearly saying, 'Serve her right.' It's ridiculous—an old woman at her time of life playing the fool like that. She ought to be thinking of her black and sinful soul"—this was a favourite joke of the vicar's—"instead of making rows in public. And now here she is, laid up with a cracked skull in the house of a perfect stranger, about two counties away. What's

it ? " taking up the telegram again—" ' c/o Averno, Beverstoft, Amory Furzeham.' Why, that must be two counties away at least."

The telegram was worded at some length. Incidentally it was the one to which we heard Eva allude as having been sent for some relays of clothing, on discovery that they were likely to be held up at Beverstoft for a time.

" Averno ? Funny name that," mused the vicar. " Doesn't sound English. Let's hope it contradicts itself. ' *Facilis decensus Averni*—ha, ha ! " he quoted, in his inborn jocosity. " Well, my pocket blue stocking. I needn't translate that for your benefit, at any rate."

" Hardly, dear. But I wonder who he is," said Hermione. " Anyway they are safe, and apparently all jolly, and well looked after. Why bother about it ? Send a wire and say I'll run down and see how they are, and all that, if you can't get away, and do the civil, and that sort of thing. I mean, of course, just for the inside of the day."

" Don't bother about it." That was one of the points about Hermione. " Don't bother about it." Soothing. The prerogative of the ornamental sex, yet how few realize it. In forty-nine cases out of fifty the axiom is " worrying." So answered the vicar, with an appreciative look at his eldest daughter. He went on—

" That's all very well, but still it *is* a bother. Here we are, indebted to a perfect stranger, because

your silly old aunt plays the qualified fool," with a sudden access of gustiness. "Pity I'm not a layman to be able to define it"—with a fresh burst of his native humour. "No. I'd better go and see about it myself."

"But—isn't it rather inconvenient to get away just now?" she urged.

"No. There's nothing to tie me. Steele can work things." Steele was the curate, and incidentally a great admirer of the absent Eva. "And it's only for the inside of a day." Dr. Passinghame had not yet made the acquaintance of Averno—which made all the difference. "I'll nose out some train that'll cover it in good time—or rather you can for me, Hermione. You can read these beastly time tables better than I can, or what's the good of going to Girton if you can't go one better on your old dad, who only took a pass degree after all—and was deuced glad to get that?"

"Oh never mind about the pass degree. If I want a tag of historical key in the course of my reading, I know where to get it," she answered with a smile. "That's all right."

"Yes, child. That's very nice and soothing to one's poor self-esteem. But what about these two silly females! For goodness sake look me up some train—not too soon, for I hate scrimmage; not too late, because it's a bore to arrive at a strange place late at night. I hate long railway journeys, however they come. I'd gladly never set foot on a station

platform again, unless it was to see somebody else off, as you know—or ought to by this time."

"All right. I'll find you one. Look here, 11.30. That lands you in 3.20 with one change. How's that? Quite a convenient time."

"That'll do, I suppose. Well, I'll be back by the last night train. But it's an abominable bore. These women and their confounded up-to-date fads—Faugh!"

"Here now, light your pipe and don't bother about up-to-date or any other fads," said Hermione tranquilly, selecting and filling one of her father's numerous briars, which, about forty strong, stacked the mantelpiece. "Didn't you agree with me just now that 'Don't bother' constitutes the secret of long life?"

"Oh, yes, I did. And you're perfectly right, dear. Only, I wonder whether in the future you'll keep up that philosophy."

"Oh, bother the future. Let the future take care of itself. There, that's consistent with the said philosophy, isn't it?" she laughed.

CHAPTER V

THE VICAR AT BEVERSTOFT

"WELL, how's the old lady getting on?" said Averno, as he stamped in at the front door, energetically, and feeling rather cold and not particularly good-humoured.

Eva Passinghame was just going up the large staircase. She turned, on hearing his entrance. They had not seen each other that day, Averno having been obliged to start for a rather distant market town before she was up—or at any rate down—on some business connected with a horse deal. And it was now early afternoon.

"Quite well, thanks, but——"

"Oh, that's all right," he interrupted. "I told Blondell she must do all that you wanted, and that you had only to give your orders."

"Yes, I know. You are too kind. But that facilitates what I have to say—but oh, we are giving you a lot of trouble. Look at this," holding out a telegram to him.

"Yes. 'Will arrive Amory Furzeham three

twenty arrange for trap J. Passinghame ',' reading it off. "Is that your father?"

"Yes—and——"

"But have you arranged for trap?" he interrupted again.

"Well, that's the awkward part I wanted to explain. I put it to Mrs. Blondell, as you weren't here, and she arranged for one of your carriages to go. But——"

"Of course she did, not being a born fool. Why, the station is seven miles off. How on earth could you have had time to arrange any other way, and why should you, when there are horses eating their heads off in the stable? I hope they sent the brougham though; for your father, I conclude, is not exactly young."

"Oh they did, thanks," she answered, and her voice softened, as she fully appreciated the kindly consideration of the thought, and that allied to the downright, almost brusque, characteristic of the man's speech and manner. Then hesitatingly: "But I am bothered how to send him back."

"Well, we'll talk about that to-morrow or the next day, Miss Passinghame. There's plenty of room here, and no man's going to travel all that distance and back in one day, with my concurrence. So there you are."

"Oh but, that's altogether too kind of you—and——"

"'Votes for Women!' Don't begin to make a speech," he interrupted, gaily. "Keep it for The Cause."

"The Cause? I shall make a convert of you yet," laughed the girl, looking at him with distinct approval. He had started under the most favourable conditions, where these and science combined had availed to get her out of a tight, nasty corner. Now as she looked at the tall, wiry figure in its easy, homespun knicker suit, and the weather-browned face—yes, it was with very distinct approval indeed. "What a first-class chucker-out you'd make, if a lot of rowdies came in to interrupt our meetings," she went on.

"Oh, well. Let's have due notice when your speech comes off, and I'll put on old clothes. Then it won't matter if they're torn a bit."

"No. Not for The Cause," she laughed brightly, as she left him and ran upstairs.

As a matter of fact, Averno, from the moment he had seen the telegram, had voted to himself the parson's coming as rather a bore. He and Eva had got along excellently well together, indeed it seemed as if they had known each other for ever so long, instead of for under forty-eight hours. The day before they had spent walking about, and she had been so thoroughly congenial. Then they had dined together, and had got through the evening in thoroughly congenial fashion. What if her father should insist on fetching her away?

there and then? That wouldn't do, and he was beginning to form plans as to how he should frustrate this, when sounds outside announced the new arrival.

"How d'you do, Dr. Passinghame. You must be cold after that long drive. I hope they put a footwarmer into the brougham. Did they? Yes. That's right. Anyway come straight in, and have something warming before you go up and see Mrs. Kaye. She's getting along top hole, the doctor says." And with this characteristic form of welcome, Averno piloted the vicar into his "den," where a tantalus containing three varieties to suit any choice, and syphon, was put out in front of a blazing, cheerful fire; very cheerful indeed to an elderly man who had just come off a long railway journey involving two changes at horrid, draughty stations, and something of a wait at each.

"Why thanks, Mr. Averno. Yes, I must say I am feeling a little run down."

"Of course you are. Here, get into that chair," designating an ideally snug one by the fire, "and —say 'when'."

Dr. Passinghame was delighted with his host. There was something so breezily refreshing about him. He was so utterly outside the conventional, so spontaneous altogether. A man like that could be no sort of a humbug he decided, and thanked his stars, or Providence, or whoever or whatever

people *do* thank, that his womenkind had fallen into such good hands. But what about Mrs. Averno; for he had no idea as to whether his host was a bachelor or not? Somehow though, he was inclined to deduce that he was.

'Well, this is very nice and comfortable, Mr. Averno," he said. "It reminds me of my old college days, for although I am a parson, you mustn't credit me with the accepted idea of a stiff and starched sort of professional with no notion outside of the 'shop'."

"That's all right, Dr. Passinghame. Here—let me fill you up again. That first of yours was much too mild for a—er—middle-aged gentleman who has just come off a long railway journey."

The vicar's eyes twinkled, and he laughed outright.

"Well, well. You are a bit of a diviner, Mr. Averno. Now I am making myself thoroughly comfortable here, and shall have a difficulty in wresting myself from this alluring chair to go and look at my sister."

"But there's no hurry to do so," struck in the other. "As I said, she's quite all right. Any time will do for that. Meanwhile, I'm heartily glad to see you, and I've told them to put you into the pink room, where you'll be all jolly. If you'd like to go there at once or any time, there you

are, or if you'd like to sit and rest a bit, here you are. It rests with you."

"But—my dear Mr. Averno, I was going back to-night, and——"

Averno knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and took another from the stack on the mantelpiece. Then he answered—

"But, my dear Dr. Passinghame, you're not. I'm not going to have any man travel that beastly long railway journey and back the same day. So here you are, and here you stay. So there's an end of it. No, no. You're here, and you can't get back without my concurrence. Station seven miles off, remember. Have a cigar," tendering a box.

"Thanks. Well, I don't know," began the vicar, dubiously—in fact, realizing how excessively snug he was feeling after hours of an abominable third-class smoker, sitting four a side with two navvies puffing vile shag, and a female of the lower order persuasion, administering nutriment to a brace of brats through an exceedingly badly-cleaned feeding-bottle.

Then came a knock at the door, and after it Eva.

"Well, old father, how are you? I didn't come to meet you, Aunt Caroline was rather fidgetty this afternoon, didn't want you to come, in fact. Said you'd be sure to railroad her about the meeting, and that made her nervous. But you mustn't, will you?"

"Oh no. I shan't bother her. She's old enough to know better, and as for you—you ought to be whipped. What d'you mean by running into that rotten business? It's abominable. Don't you agree with me, Mr. Averno?"

"Well perhaps—on the main point. But——"

He stopped, as he caught Eva's mischievous glance. She was going to convert him, she had declared. Well, so far, on the whole, he didn't care one way or another.

"How did they get out of it, Mr. Averno, and how did they get here?" struck in Dr. Passinghame. "The telegram of course, said nothing as to detail, telegrams never do, naturally."

It was Averno's turn to feel foolish, and he did.

"Oh, the crowd was inclined to be a bit rough," he said, off-handedly, "and I happened to be in time to get them away in my car. So, I brought them here because I didn't know where the devil else—er—ahem—I didn't know where else to bring them."

Eva spluttered with laughter, but there was a very soft light in her eyes. Then she struck in.

"Yes. That's all right. But, father, I should like you to have seen all the heads he punched. It was quite good. And none got a look in at him in return. Then he simply dragged us out—I don't know how—and we found ourselves here before you could say knife. It was splendid."

"Ha-ha! That's good. That's distinctly good," laughed the vicar, heartily—very heartily. "Like our old time Town and Gown rows."

"I suppose something of the kind," said Averno, thankful that the rejoinder had given him an opening for something to say, for he was beginning to feel a bit foolish over the girl's attempt to make a hero of him, and the subject opened a way of relief. "I suppose in your time, Dr. Passinghame, there was a touch of the Verdant Green, Mr. Bouncer, element up at Oxford."

"Yes. There was. Now it's a thing of the past. It may be for the better or it may not. I won't undertake to say in either direction. Are you an Oxford man, by the way?"

"Not I—worse luck. I was shipped out to split rails in the bush as soon as I left school—or any other job I could capture."

"Well, I don't know that you look any the worse for that," was the answer, and the speaker sized up the other's good proportions, and every movement telling of symmetry and strength, even such a casual one as turning to select a fresh pipe and fill it. For the movement was quick and decisive, a sure indicative of character.

Then they talked about other things, sport and games and so forth, and got on very mutual grounds; and Averno came to the conclusion that his new guest was quite all right although he was a parson, and Eva sat in one of the big lounge chairs, and put

in a word here and there, until about an hour and a half had gone by, and then she suddenly suggested that her father should go up and see Aunt Caroline.

That elderly Suffragette was garrulous but resentful; the latter because her brother had been such a long time downstairs since his arrival without coming to see her. But that only bored him. He could stand old women and their ways, he used to say, but they bored him. However, this one was full of her rescue by Averno—of their rescue—and in the result the vicar was more full up than before with a glow of fellow-feeling for his host. Eva, of course, had not said much in the presence of the latter, but from the older lady he had got it all in full.

"Well, you'd better look sharp and get right, Caroline," he said. "It isn't fair to saddle this man with you and all the bother for longer than you can help."

"That's just like a man—a mere man," was the tart reply. "How can I get all right before I can help. And it's the man—the mere man—who has landed me in this predicament. The hideous howling brutes. I believe they'd have killed us."

"But for a man—a mere man," cut in her brother drily. "So where does The Cause come in? You can't get along without *us*, you see, not at any price." With which parting shot he left her and

went downstairs, to enjoy presently, and thoroughly, a snug little dinner with his host and his daughter, and a subsequent very snug evening smoke in the "den" of the former.

CHAPTER VI

IN THE GOOD ENGLISH COUNTRY

"DO you shoot, Dr. Passinghame?" said Averno after breakfast, the next morning.

"Well, h'm—I do sometimes. In fact I used to be able to do my right and left neatly," answered the vicar, his eyes brightening at the recollection.

"Good then. We'll take a turn at the partridges—if you feel up to it. I can rig you up with a gun that'll fit. What do you say?"

"Well, your offer is very tempting, Mr. Averno. Of late years I've got out of it; got a sort of idea into my head, you know, that a priest ought to eschew that sort of thing; but—as I am off duty——"

"Of course you are off duty; and priest or not, a sportsman is a sportsman. Why one of the hardest riders to hounds I ever knew was the priest of some weirdly unpronounceable-named parish in Galway, and a fine sportsman all round. So there you are. Now come along, and I'll try and fit you with a gun."

They went into the "den," in one corner of

which was a glazed cupboard containing several guns. The vicar selected one, with the eye of a connoisseur. Averno noted this approvingly, although it was his favourite weapon, and one which he had intended to use himself. But any other would do just as well.

"Yes. This is all right," said the parson "Couldn't be better. Not too straight in the stock. Fits me as if it had been made for me."

"Good," answered his host heartily. "Nothing like having an iron that fits you. In half-an-hour then."

"Thanks. That'll do first rate. I'll just go up and have a look at my sister. I say though. This Suffragette bunkum is getting rather too thick, don't you think?"

Averno laughed; then he went to the door and came back.

"Yes, I do," he said. "But your daughter seems red hot on it, and she'd hate me for ever if I agreed with you, and I don't want that."

Dr. Passinghame smiled to himself. He remembered that his host was youngish, and that his youngest daughter was an out-of-the-way attractive girl—barring this one fad.

"Oh, she's been dragged into the thing by her aunt. Insists on selling Suffragist papers once a week in the street at Burbleton, and so on. I think it idiotic myself, but it seems to me the women, both young and old, have taken the bit between

their teeth nowadays, and you've got to put up with them."

"Oh, yes. These movements all sizzle out of themselves. It's Gamaliel's joke over again. 'Let them alone.' If they sizzle, they will."

"Ah, yes, yes, yes. Gamaliel was a first-rate K.C. of his time," chuckled the vicar.

In the hall Averno nearly cannoned against Eva.

"I'm going to take your parent out shooting," he said.

"Oh, are you? He'll enjoy that. He often gets disgusted because he doesn't get any. That'll be jolly. And—Mr. Averno—if you like I can join you at lunch, if you tell me where to go."

"Why, of course. How delightful. But I never thought of suggesting it because it hadn't occurred to me that you'd care to sit on the leeward side of a bank and hedgerow eating more or less vilely concocted sandwiches."

"But I would. I should enjoy it above all things."

"'Votes for Women!' I'll take care they make better sandwiches than usual. Though that won't be anything to crow over, by the laws of relative."

So it was arranged that Eva should meet the two shootists at a certain point, and at a given time, and then Averno and his guest set out.

It was a lovely autumn morning, fresh, cloudless, misty at first, but this soon cleared off. The whiff of the stubble and the dewy swedes was delightful in

its freshness, and birds were abundant. Averno noted, with increasing appreciation of his guest, that the latter turned down his right and left more than once, in thorough sportsmanlike style, and by the time Eva joined them at the point indicated, carefully piloted thereto by one of the stable boys, they had bagged something over twenty brace, with a hare or two, and some other unconsidered trifles.

"Why, this is glorious," declared Dr. Passinghame. "I haven't had such a morning's sport since—I don't know when."

It rather was. They were seated on a sunny bank outside a fir covert, wherein every now and then a cock pheasant crowed defiantly—his time hadn't quite come yet. In front the ground sloped gently away in a bracken-sprinkled rabbit warren, and beyond that a gleaming field of yellow mustard. Then tall oaks, browning to autumn, and a further line of fir covert. Eva, in her workmanlike, country-built skirt, was taking it all in with sparkling eyes. And she was looking very alluring.

"It's perfectly delightful," she said, working her way with a fine, youthful, hearty appetite, through the already decried sandwiches. "Father, how many misses did you make?"

"Now there's a woman all over," said the vicar, who had shot uncommonly well, and was in high good humour with himself in consequence—indeed we don't know of any cause more likely to produce that result than the consciousness of having shot un-

commonly well, unless it is that of having produced rather more than an average day's number of thousand words for the entertainment of other—and more or less unappreciative—people. "Sportsmen don't talk about how many misses So-and-So made, my child—at least if they do there's something deficient in their *cachet* as sportsmen."

"Quite right, Doctor," said Averno, emphatically. "If I owned a billiard room, which unfortunately I don't, I should have a notice stuck up prohibiting the word 'fluke' under pain of a considerable 'sconce.' It leads to more snuffiness than enough, and should never be heard."

"I quite agree," answered the vicar. "There are more bad losers than good ones—and that's not sport."

"But why shouldn't they use the word?" struck in Eva defiantly. "That'd give the dominant male good practice as to keeping his temper."

Both "dominant males" there present, smiled. She went on.

"Men always get so quarrelsome over games. I've noticed it particularly. Over tennis for instance, it's always the men who quarrel."

"So they do—for all the world like a brace of snuffy old women who are losing at whist," said her father slily. Whereupon Eva, rolling up a ball of sandwich paper, undutifully shied it at his head. He retaliated by becoming sarcastic—good-humouredly—over The Cause, and he had a dry wit of his

own, and the fun waxed fast and furious. Averno was in no hurry to end it by suggesting a resumption of hostilities against fur and feather. He was finding huge satisfaction in watching the changing light in the girl's face and eyes as she parried her father's chaff and gave him as good again.

The vicar was thoroughly enjoying himself. He had enjoyed the morning, he had enjoyed his lunch, and was now enjoying his pipe. He was enjoying, too, the fire of chaff he was keeping up with his daughter. Then the latter struck home.

"It's all very well to abuse The Cause, old chap," she said, "but you've no particular occasion to now of all times in the year."

"Not, eh? And why particularly now, may I ask?"

"Yes, you may. And I'll answer. Weren't you saying just now you hadn't such a morning's sport since—you didn't know when?"

"Well, what's that got to do with it?"

"Well, you wouldn't have had it but for The Cause. How's that?"

Both men exploded.

"A case of 'Cause' and effect," struck in Averno, drily. "No, it's all right, Eccles," as the keeper came clearing up things, bits of paper and so on, as a sort of hint that it was time to be moving. "We haven't done our digestive smoke yet, and I never did believe in making a toil of a pleasure. Will that suit you, Doctor?"

"Perfectly. To tell you the truth I prefer it. You are a very model host, Mr. Averno."

"I feel a very modest one, Dr. Passinghame, and take off my hat on the strength of it," laughed Averno, suiting the action to the word. "Now I feel intensely indebted to The Cause, in that it has been instrumental in procuring me—so far—two exceedingly pleasant days. I say—so far—but I hope it will be three. We might take the other side of the place to-morrow. It isn't a very large beat, but there are heaps of birds."

The vicar looked wistful.

"Well, I don't know, Mr. Averno. I should like it intensely, but this is Thursday, and if I don't get back to-morrow——"

"I know," struck in Averno. "You won't have time to maufacture a brace of sermons. Never mind, Doctor. Let them off one, and turn on your auxiliary for the other."

"Well, I might do that. Personally, I think we give people far too much sermonizing. Thanks. I should enjoy another day. Rather. But I must get back on Saturday."

"Please yourself about that," answered Averno, "but you'd please me better if you didn't. Well, we'll have another day to-morrow, anyhow. Perhaps now we'd better resume operations. Eccles, we'll proceed."

"Yes, sir," answered the keeper, whose professional soul was secretly resenting the time that

was being wasted over the after lunch smoke, but then, to be sure, one was a parson—all the same, though, the said parson could bring down his birds, he had to admit in common honesty.

"What a love of a dog that is, Mr. Averno," said Eva, as a glossy black retriever came insinuatingly up. It was as black as night, with a dazzling white grin from splendid teeth, and with feathery-haired paws. "Yes. You're a perfect beauty," taking its head between her hands and gazing into the soft, lustrous eyes. "Rather, you are."

An idea was taking shape in Averno's mind. But now he said: "Yes, he's rather a good dog, but not so good as Stirrup," the latter, it will be remembered, was the little Clumber which had refused to be coaxed or threatened into entering the precincts of the tarred shed. "Stirrup retrieves better than any retriever I've ever seen—eh, Faku?"

At sound of his name the dog came over to his master, wagging his flag of a tail.

"Oh, he is a beauty," went on the girl. "What do you call him, by the way?"

"Faku. I named him after an old Matabele induna I used to know. Eight black dogs out of twelve are named Zulu, so I thought I'd change the nationality."

"Matabele? Oh, then, you've been in that part?" said the vicar, interestedly.

"Rather. Other parts of the world, too. But for choice give me old England," looking round on

the outspread of field and woodland, with a glint of water where the sun touched a reach of a sluggish and winding stream here and there where its bend would appear, framed in emerald.

"Can't I walk with you, Mr. Averno?" pleaded Eva. "I know women are apt to be voted a bore in the shooting field. But I don't want to go back yet. And I'd like to see some shooting."

Averno looked dubious, then at her boots.

"Certainly," he said. "But—I'm afraid it'll be, well, rather wet—we're going into swedes presently—and you're not got up for it." Incidentally he had managed to fit his male guest with a serviceable pair of shooting boots and gaiters.

"Oh, I don't mind. I can change when we get in."

"Well, if you don't mind, come along then," he answered, with the smile she had begun rather to like. "You can do mascot, and I expect I shall hold record straight."

Her father said nothing. Perhaps recent experience had taught him that he might as well have objected to the sun setting at the usual time instead of an hour later, as to Eva getting her own way.

However, when the sun did eventually set, it set upon a fine healthy trio, returning through the autumn evening with a touch of frost in it, just the touch necessary to set off Eva's dark, mantling beauty, and to raise an additional sparkle in her eyes. Over the snaky wind of the river a line of thick white

mist was more than beginning to form, and the wailing whistle of the curlew, mingled with the flighting swish of wild duck just picked out against the glooming sky, but too high up to be of any use. From this and that dark fir covert, owls hooted, and one, on downy noiseless pinions, dropped down and floated along, just in front of Eva's face, almost startling her. The bag again had proved good, and all three, though they did not expatiate on it, were thinking that they had seldom, if ever, spent a more enjoyable day. And all this was the outcome of one foolish old woman starting in to interrupt a political gathering composed of a rough, and wholly unsympathetic crowd.

CHAPTER VII

THE TARRED SHED

EVA PASSINGHAME was feeling depressed—in fact, to be candid with herself, she was feeling very depressed. Over a fortnight had gone by since her arrival at Beverstoft, and now to-morrow she would be leaving it. Her aunt had been pronounced fit and able to be removed, and on the face of this there was no reason in the world for her, for them, to remain any longer. And Eva was not at all inclined to welcome the idea of an immediate return to Comptonswick vicarage and its rather sordid and drab and stucco suburban surroundings.

Her present surroundings were such a contrast. The beautiful peaceful woodlands and wide stretches of open; the fine, bracing air, the villages nestling in trees; all this had grown upon her, and who shall say perhaps the companionship of their strange host; a man of ideas, and full of dash and sparkle, and utterly unconventional.

It was the most *bizarre* of all occurrences, this

situation in which she had found herself, she decided. To have been whisked away all unexpectedly to the home of an utterly unknown stranger for instance, and then after a little over a fortnight to realize that she knew this unknown stranger better than she had ever *known* any one before in her life, why that in itself was an outside episode in anybody's experience. And now she was about to part with this hitherto utterly unknown stranger and—that, to be perfectly candid with herself, was at the bottom of her depression. For she did not want to do so in the least.

They had been thrown together practically all the time. Her aunt had only been allowed to come downstairs during the last three or four days, and Averno seldom had visitors, according to the good old English country custom, wherein an occasional call-*cum*- that abominable institution afternoon tea, seems to spell the very acme of sociability. But she had not minded that. She had been somehow drawn into all his outdoor interests, and in fact, if she had set herself out to compare the time she had spent out of doors, mostly with him, to the time she had not, why the former would have largely dominated. And she was looking and feeling more fit than she had ever looked or felt in her life; and now the time had come to an end.

She was alone, walking down one of the wood rides they had walked down on the day after she had first arrived—Averno had left in the morning,

on magisterial and other business. The days were drawing in now, and already the mists were beginning to hang over the rush-fringed mere, where swimming coots uttered their half-shrill, half-raucous croak. The oak woods were hung with a very beauty of changing copper, and the larches showed a contrast of golden green, for the autumn was an early one, and the rush of colour had come in with a will.

Eva looked up. The fern-fringed ride here terminated in a tarred shed. She looked at it strangely—with its tarred palings and gaping gateway—the very shed they had gone into during their walk on the first day. She stopped in front of the said gaping gateway, and a strange eerie feeling came over her as she remembered how the dog had refused to cross it. She felt an overmastering impulse to enter the place once more, but an equally overmastering impulse seemed to hold her back. Then it occurred to her that the story, or legend rather, that Averno had told her, was just a poor, commonplace tale of haunting by popular repute. It was ridiculous. She would go in all the same. Yes, on those terms she would go in too. But—why on earth should she want to?

The place was an ordinary, disused, commonplace cowshed, situated on the edge of a wood, sheltered by the trees. It was absurd even so much as to think of the story attached. A commonplace, sordid crime had been perpetrated there; even if it were true that such had been perpetrated at all;

yet something impelled her to go in and stand upon the spot again. Perpetrated, too, by ordinary commonplace specimens of a not high class of humanity; how on earth could such affect her? But she went in all the same, and stood upon the spot where the murderer had secreted his victim, and beneath either of the beams which had been the instrument of his expiating his crime by his own doing.

And then a curious influence came about her—came over her. She was conscious of feeling distinctly frightened, and yet she saw nothing, heard nothing. The woods outside were quite still in the deepening dusk. There was no sound whatever that could be distorted into any sort of meaning. An "influence"— that was it. She had heard of such, as clinging about places—about rooms, for instance, which certain units of humanity had occupied and had left their "influence" behind them, and at these theories she had not altogether scoffed. Yet here and now, she was distinctly conscious of some such influence. She would have given anything to have looked up and found Averno standing beside her, or, in fact, anybody at all; any human creature. But she was alone.

Why did she not flee from the place? Nothing easier. But she did not. An evil, baleful influence seemed to be spreading, thickening, around her, and her very power of movement was, as it were, spellbound. And the dusk deepened into almost night.

What was it? She saw nothing, heard nothing,

but in the darkling gloom she *felt*, and as she felt she realized the cold shivery creep that comes over any human subject brought face to face with the world beyond. Eva Passinghame was made of as work-a-day clay as any up-to-date woman, but now and here in the silence and gloom she was utterly helpless. The effect was upon her, and strive as she would there was no throwing it off.

A sound of footsteps outside, then a voice.

"Oh, here you are. I heard you had been strolling down this way. Eccles told me. But what on earth are you doing in there?"

Averno, hearty and downright, came through the small yard.

"I don't know. Anyway here I am, and—I think it's time I turned back."

"I *know* it is," he answered, noting how white and drawn her face looked, as she came out into the moonlight. "But—what on earth were you doing in there?"

"Why you told me it was haunted—and—as I had strolled as far as this I thought I'd go in and—try the effect."

He looked at her curiously. This was not the girl he had pulled out of the riot brimming over with combativeness and glowing health. She looked white and drawn, as if she had been taking a week's wear and tear out of herself without sleep.

"Never mind about 'the effect.' Come along back home," he said, refraining purposely from

entering into any subject which it was best she should forget. Women were such imaginative creatures. What a fool he had been to tell this one that silly yarn about this old shack. Of course it had "got upon" her. The sex had a passion for crystal-gazing, and table-rapping, and all that sort of bosh, he remembered, and of course when they were given that way it got upon their nerves. The up-to-date woman must be either gambling or given over to some form of debased superstition, was the result of his observation, and he held both in utter contempt. Still, for this particular individual unit of the sex his mind was on the side of tolerant indulgence. By way of counteracting the nerve mood he began to tell her of his day's doings in characteristic airy and breezy fashion.

"I shall get heavily fined, and my licence suspended by my own Bench if I don't watch it," he laughed. "I was letting the car out coming back, I can tell you, absolutely law breaking at forty miles an hour. Then—but I had slowed down then—I shockingly 'shaved' a brace of cyclists, a man and a girl. The girl was behind enough to be out of earshot, luckily, but the man put on sufficient spurt to get alongside, and then if he didn't split asunder some blasphemies that were perfectly original and highly appropriate—and, I'm bound to admit, thoroughly deserved, it was a pity. I'd like to make that chap's acquaintance if only to take down some of his highly-coloured invocations. But I'm

sorry for my future, in this world or the next, if a tenth of them come true."

"Well, you shouldn't do that. My sympathies are all with the cyclists. What business have you to think you've bought the whole road? Supposing you'd 'shaved' *me*, for instance, with that express engine of yours—do you think I should exactly love you for it?"

Averno laughed; entirely, whole-souledly. At any rate he was getting her out of that vein she seemed to have got into; a silly morbid vein he defined it.

"No, I don't," he answered, but wondering, and rather wishing he could have made her do so on some other motive. "But what the deuce took you into that pigsty of a place at all. I wish I hadn't told you that silly yarn about it."

"Why not. It was interesting."

"It wasn't. It was skittles. I tell you what. I'll have the whole shack cut down and burnt to-morrow. It only tends to foster an idiotic country superstition."

He ought to have gone on talking about his road—and illegal—doings, as he had just started to do in order to get her mind clean off the vein in which he had first found her. Instead of that he had raked up the very subject he had wanted her to get rid of.

"No, don't do that. It would be a pity," she answered. "There are not many places with the strong psychic element attached, and when you have

one, why demolish it? And then remember that this same psychic element might transfer itself elsewhere. Into your own house, for instance. How would you like that?"

"Well, this bangs Banagher!" he exploded, with a mighty laugh. "Why, I thought you Suffragettes were nothing if not absolutely matter-of-fact. And here's a combatant one—no, militant, isn't that the word, sounds more resonant, doesn't it—who's fed as full with tinpot superstition as a country yokel. No, really I shouldn't have believed it."

A retort was on Eva's pretty lips—a sharp, but good-humoured retort, but it did not shape. She had not shaken off the recent "influence," and somehow his reference to the subject had seemed to bring it all up again. Then her mind went off into another vein. This was the last walk they would have together, at any rate for some time; why introduce anything that might even approach a discordant element?

"Pity you're obliged to go to-morrow," he went on, inconsequently. "Lord, how I'll miss you!"

Her face lit up swiftly.

"Will you?" she said, with an unconscious softening of her tone.

"Of course I will. Look at the times we've had together, so unconstrained and jolly. But why not draw it out a little longer, a few days, at any rate? Persuade Aunt Caroline she isn't quite fit yet?"

Eva shook her head.

"I'm afraid not. She says we've been more than trespassing on your kindness already—and really so we have."

"Bosh—utter bosh! Haven't you been giving a lonely man the time of his life?"

There was a subtle emphasis on the "you." On Eva's perception it was not lost.

"I'm only too glad," she said, and her tone softened.

The wood ride had darkened. Here and there the white "scut" of a rabbit darting across right under their feet sometimes, showed out, and the belated crow of fussy cock pheasants flapping up to their roosts. Then in the distance a fox barked, and the fierce cries of little brown owls hawking over stubble and warren outside, mingled with the soft melodious hoot of their larger and native kindred. The creatures of Night were coming forth; some to prey, some to be preyed upon.

"You've only been here a little more than a fortnight and, good God, how I'll miss you," he went on. "Look here. Isn't there another political meeting in the neighbourhood that Aunt Caroline could go and interrupt, then we could keep her comfortably in hospital here for another fortnight or so?"

Eva laughed.

"That's a shame, really an abominable shame. You want some one injured so that you can have your own way. Think."

"Oh, well. That's one way of looking at it. But now—*you* think. These old ladies like being invalided. They've no bother and can take it easy. Then think what a good time we've had—at least I believe I can say 'we '——" Eva nodded. "Well, then, there you are. It pans out all right."

"Well, upon my word I never saw your like for a downright way of putting things," she answered with a laugh, and the glance she flashed upon him in the starlight was quite good—to him.

Then they talked about other things, perhaps a little absently. By some strange telepathy both were thinking of to-morrow's parting, and each knew that the other was. And then—perhaps all too soon—they were home again.

Mrs. Kaye, otherwise Aunt Caroline, was not exactly an acquisition to any party, large or small. She certainly was not to this one. To begin with she had a passion for monopolizing the conversation, and as if that were not enough she had an equal passion for dragging in "shop" in this instance, spelling The Cause. Her niece being young, knew when to relegate "shop," otherwise The Cause, to its proper time and place—within a fairly moderate degree that is. But Aunt Caroline did not: consequently when they met at dinner that evening—that last evening—she set to work to bore the immortal soul out of her host on the subject. Yet he listened tolerantly, remembering that but for The

Cause—the Blessed Cause, he was inclined to name it—he would not have enjoyed an entirely novel, because unconstrained, time. And he had; wherefore he listened tolerantly. But he was thinking how totally antipathetic people of the same blood could be. Dr. Passinghame was good company, a man of sound sense, and a good sportsman. His sister was a terrible bore, possessed of no sense, and if gifted with any sporting instincts they found vent in kicking up a row at political meetings, and having to be hauled out of the same by main force. Such was her host's analytical summing up of her at the end of the evening—the last evening. But he forgave her the whole on the strength of the redeeming feature of the situation; which spelt—Eva.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SPICE GONE OUT

USUALLY of a settled and equable turn of mind, in spite of his characteristic downrightness of speech and act, Averno's mind now had taken on a turn which was neither settled nor equable.

He was alone again. Well, that had been his chronic state of existence, yet now, since the departure of his guests, he was really feeling alone—realizing it perhaps for the first time.

"How I'll miss you!" he had said to Eva, in his downright, straight-from-the-shoulder way, and how he had. For they had been thrown together in a wholly unexpected, but utterly untrammelled intimacy for over a fortnight, and that fortnight seemed to him now to crowd into itself something like a year's acquaintance. There they had been; morning, noon and night; with nothing on earth but their own mutual convenience to consult; for the older lady, as we have said, did not fairly leave her room till a day or two before her departure. They had walked or ridden or bicycled together, or

rushed at break-neck speed over about two counties per afternoon in Averno's huge, abominable, road-hogging motor-car, with no one to say them nay, or interfere in any way with their freedom of action—Averno had laid himself out, as a point of punctillo, to let himself be bored for half-an-hour on most days by Mrs. Kaye's more or less fierce dissertations on The Cause, what time he had paid her perfunctory visits, and apart from this she kept upstairs, for which he was very devoutly thankful indeed. He suspected that Eva shared his gratitude on that head, The Cause notwithstanding.

But most of their outdoor time had been taken up in walking. The autumn days had been exceptionally lovely, and English autumn days that are that, are very lovely indeed. But the worst of it was that every nook and corner of the place now was fraught with association, for whenever he went into such again, there was always the recollection of the last time they had been there together: even the recollection of what they had been talking about at the time on that very spot. Then he would conjure up her image; her bright dark eyes, *piquante*, alluring, and the recollection stirred him. A fortnight, or more, of such close companionship can do a great deal, and now, as he went about, alone in his own fields and woods, it seemed as though he was alone, in a sense in which he had never felt before.

Yet Philip Averno was not a sentimental man,

nor a susceptible one; never had been. But now a something seemed to have come into his life. Why not, then, decide the situation one way or another? Well, he was rather hard-headed, and his answer to this very question, which he found himself more than once asking himself, was that something over a fortnight's acquaintance, under exceptionally favourable conditions, was not a sufficient test. Still, he felt a new-born loneliness, and it required a great deal of hard-headedness to withstand hurrying on what might prove a happy remedy.

He had never thought much about the other sex; not seriously, that is. It was delightful at times, but—not seriously. Now—well, he missed a certain unit of the same at every turn. And he had never done so before; and—the circumstances of life were in no wise different.

Apart from the outdoor side of it, how dull and lonely it was at table! The bright, sparkling flow; not of inconsequent nothings, either; he missed every time he sat down. Only a fortnight and over—yet three times a day. He had been wont to prolong those sittings, had refrained from the conventional withdrawal, and had kept his companion with him while he smoked his after-dinner cigar, and she, nothing loth, had sat on, and now looking back upon this, it seemed to him one of the most delightful half-hours of the day. They had talked on every subject under Heaven; even on the

sacred Cause, as to which he had an open mind, and listened indulgently in consequence; but far more of other things had come in. And now he was alone again, and he hurried over the table sections of the day. Mrs. Blondell, the housekeeper —he would not run to a butler, decided the place was not big enough to carry one—noticed it, not without some anxiety, for she wondered how potential and altered circumstances might affect her position as regarded the future.

He had rushed his two guests back to Comptonswick, through a county and a half, in his big car, incurring a ten-pound fine every ditto number of miles—and incidentally, serve him right, for he ought to have had his driving licence suspended long before. He had, however, landed them safe at the vicarage, and had suggested to Dr. Passinghame that a very fair sprinkling of early pheasants could be picked up among the hedgerows and stubbles and turnips in a week or two, if he cared to come over. He had also made the acquaintance of Hermione, who had rather liked him. Then he had returned to Beverstoft and solitude.

To counteract the latter, he had got two or three men down to let off the gun a bit, but they had bored him. It was all right out of doors, but at the restful and congenial time of the evening they had wanted to play bridge, and he hated it. He did not see any advantage in indulging in mathematical exercises between dinner and bedtime, so he

had not regretted their departure and had relapsed into solitude.

And it suited him better. He did a lot of partridge shooting, and he did it alone. He didn't want an incursion of commonplace bores who hadn't a head above bridge of an evening, so he left out fellow-man—as a rule he was congenial with his own sex. But given a gun, and plenty of things to let it off at, there's precious little scope for imaginings in other directions. But in the evening—and the evenings were now drawing in close—that was where it came in.

Dr. Passinghame, in reply to his again repeated invite, had come over once for the outside of a couple of days, and had brought his own rather long-disused gun. But he had not brought over his youngest daughter, although Averno had plainly suggested he had plenty of room for any number. However, they had had the same couple of days of very fair sport, and the vicar had thoroughly enjoyed himself. He did not want to play bridge in the evening, in fact was more than content to sit before a roaring cheerful fire in his host's den, enjoying an excellent cigar, and other things. And, insidiously, Averno would lead him on to talk.

"These women are getting beyond holding, Averno," he said, puffing out a contented cloud of smoke nevertheless. "My sister will insist on ramping off here, and ramping off there, and making herself a general nuisance everywhere she goes.

She's loaded up with leaflets now about The Cause, and I find a fresh pile on my study table every morning. I just lob them off into the waste paper basket, but next day I find a fresh batch there all the same. Well, she doesn't mind. She retrieves them from the basket and plants them on to some one else—ha-ha! Howling joke, isn't it? I must take to chucking them in the fire—then it won't pay so well—what?"

"Rather not. But—your daughter—is she still as hot on it?"

"Oh, yes," disgustedly. "When women freeze on to a thing they do so to a superlative point. Lack of sense of proportion. So—there you are. Now there's Hermione. She's an exception. She's wonderfully level-headed, and yet when she first went to Girton, I own I had a sort of prejudice—you know, the blue-stocking idea. Yet she has come back without these fads—and the other, with nothing of the blue stocking about her, has taken them on hot foot."

Averno remembered Hermione the placid, and the recollection, even within an hour's acquaintance, was a pleasant one. Certainly she hadn't got any fiery ambition for a vote. As to which he said—

"And when they get the vote—*The* Vote—nine tenths of them won't be able to use it. They're not qualified—as householders, and all that."

"Of course they're not, and that's the idiotic part of it," answered the vicar. "But it's a sort of

shibboleth, just as when they go mad on religion. They never can keep within the limits of a sense of proportion. So there you have it."

"Your daughter seems very enthusiastic on the subject," said Averno, with an eye to a draw.

"Of course she is," was the answer, with a suspicion of testiness. "Helps carry flags along Piccadilly when they get up what they call a demonstration. Her aunt worked her into it. 'Great cry and little wool' I call it, for neither of them would have a vote even if they got it, on the same terms that we have. They're not qualified—on the same terms. By the way, Averno, you've got it uncommonly snug here, and what makes it more so still is your utter unconventionality." And the speaker looked round with an expression of entire appreciation.

"Well, Doctor, I'm glad you think so, for it's a condition of things which doesn't appeal to most people, but entirely does to me. I've always laid myself out for it, ever since I've been in a position to please myself. For instance, I'm not going to tie myself down to having to be on a certain spot by the time a certain bell rings. If I'm not there I'm not. Why should I be? I'm not a slave."

"Ha-ha-ha!" laughed the other. "I know a good few people—not only of the feminine persuasion either—whose chins would about rap the toes of their boots in mingled horror and amazement at that idea. But—situated as you are, upon my

soul I thoroughly agree with you. My ideal of the enjoyment of life has always been to do what I like, and perhaps more important still, to do it *when* I like, or perhaps even more important still—not to do it at all."

"Quite right—quite right."

"But," went on the vicar with a twinkle in his eyes, "I've got to do the reverse of this. I'm not intending to drag in 'shop,' but in my profession we seem to live in a chronic state of doing what we don't like, and—*vice versa*."

"Of course. I've seen your place and surroundings. But now—at your time of life why not ease off a little? I should think, with your record, and all that, you could get some snug country bunk which would keep you all jolly, and give you a certain amount of sport. Sort of retiring on pension, like a Civil Servant."

The speaker was turning over in his mind two or three presentations in the gift of friends of his around, which might at any moment fall vacant. Perhaps he might be able to work it, and then the girl whom he had begun so surely to miss, might be transferred, comparatively speaking, to next door. But even there the corrosive drop suggested itself. The said potential presenters were young and sporting. Perhaps it would be better, for the present at any rate, to let well alone, and to keep Eva Passinghame still at a county and a half away.

"No, not yet," said the vicar. now speaking a

trifle seriously. "I don't feel justified in giving up—not for another ten years. It's rather a matter of conscience."

"I see. I always respect conscience—even when it takes the form of 'Votes for Women,'" answered Averno, with a big laugh, for he certainly didn't want the other to get on any serious tack. "We were talking about the conventionalities. Well, the great thing is comfort. We've been having jolly snug dinners together and a snug smoke afterwards, but you didn't mind when I put it to you that I didn't want to waste half-an-hour when I was tired—just healthily tired—peeling off a lot of clothes and putting on a thin grotesque kit called evening dress, because it was the thing to do?"

"Of course I didn't."

"Very well then, there you are. That's me. My philosophy is—never make yourself uncomfortable unless you're obliged. I've had to do it too often because I *was* obliged."

"There's a lot in that," answered the other, lighting a fresh cigar, and lying back in his chair feeling at the very apogee of comfort and restfulness. "You know, Averno, I'm rather an unconventional sort of parson, and I'm getting old. I often think it's time for a little comfort and ease at the end of life, but there comes in the rub—not to desert one's post."

"Well, Doctor, I should never suspect you of wanting to do that, in fact now I think of it, I seem

to remember reading in the papers some sort of row you were having—with a bishop or somebody —because you were sticking to it too hard and zealously."

"Oh, yes. That was a tinpot affair. Some people came down to annoy us, but they were mighty soon thrown out. It didn't carry any lasting effect. By the way, I believe Eva tried her best to take a hand in that game, but some one prevented her. She had been learning Ju-jitsu, and thought it a good opportunity of putting her teaching to the test."

"Oh, had she?" he said, started into interest, with the idea that now Eva was coming into the talk. "Does she keep up her practice?"

But he was disappointed. The subject was evidently distasteful.

"I don't know," answered the vicar, in a disgusted tone. "What on earth are not women taking up in these days has yet to be put a limit to. I don't like the idea of it all. I suppose I'm old-fashioned, and all that. Still—well, Eva has got a pretty strong will of her own, and like most women who don't get all their way, well—you soon know it, that's all."

By every right of reasoning this casual, conversational remark should have set Averno thinking. So it did, but not in the warning direction. Yet he had a pretty strong will of his own—an exceptionally strong one, in fact.

After Dr. Passinghame's departure he had re-

lapsed into his feeling lonely stage, and the worst of it was there seemed no immediate way out. It was all very well the idea of an ultimate way out, but his impetuous temperament exacted an immediate way out; and the worst of *that* was, there was none. Short of old Aunt Caroline getting her silly old head knocked again, the recent condition of things could not get itself repeated, and there was probably no sort of similar gathering into which he could inveigle her with the same result as before. And his judgment restrained him from rushing things, which was a curious set off against the way in which he was given to doing so in matters of everyday life. Well, he must possess his soul in patience, and wait and watch. And with this idea he managed to become normal again.

CHAPTER IX

BACK IN STUCCODOM

"WELL, Hermione—here we are again, back at the old rigmarole, and the old everything else." And Eva threw off her cloak impatiently, and subsided into a chair. It was five p.m., and tea time of course.

Hermione, leaning back in *her* chair, placid, said nothing much. She had noticed a sort of impatience about her sister since the latter's return ; now a few days back ; a sort of discontent with the home life. There had always been a touch of this, but not so pronounced as since the time she had put in at Beverstoft.

"Yes, I hate this," went on Eva. "I'm perfectly dead sick of it—and——"

"What are you perfectly dead sick of ? "

The question came from her father, who had just come in. The door of the room had, of course, been left open by this logical Suffragette, so that they had not heard. The girl did not start, she merely looked round.

"Oh, I don't know. Never mind, dear," she answered. "You must allow for the inconsequence of Mere Woman."

She was fond of him, and wouldn't have said anything to hurt his feelings for the world. And she knew he was anxious about her own as to the monotony of life, in this stucco suburb, as she was wont to put it on such occasions as she did give way.

"I had a most enjoyable time down at Averno's," went on the vicar. "We had some excellent sport, and—what a companionable man, and what a very excellent host he is."

"Yes. He's all that," assented Eva, heartily. "Well, father, it's time you got out of your shell a bit, and he seems to have got you out of it. By the way, why not ask him down here for the day? That thundering car of his seems to cover about half England and back in something like an hour."

"Well, why not? Or he might put in a week-end. Only—I shouldn't know what to do with him—on Sunday, for instance," dubiously.

Eva thought she might possibly know—or might not. To be sure, Sunday might be an awkward day. Her father was apt to be punctilious over certain observances, and then—where would Averno come in? But she said—

"Well, why make it a week-end? There seems a sort of superstition attaching to week-ends. Why

not say a mid-week? Tuesday to Friday, for instance?"

"Why yes. That would do. But he might have shooting engagements."

"But so he might on Saturday or Monday. No, ask him for a mid-week, if you're going to ask him at all," concluded Eva, decisively.

"Who are you going to ask?" said Mrs. Kaye, coming in, like her brother, in the middle of a conversation.

"Mr. Averno," answered the latter. "It would be nice to get him here for a day or two after the kindness and hospitality we have met with from him."

"Yes. He was certainly all that," said Aunt Caroline, none too cordially. "But he has some eccentric ideas."

"But that's just what he said we had," replied Eva, a bit sharply. "Well, what does it matter? Works are better than faith anyhow. St. James says so. Eh, father? Now, sink the 'shop,' and back me up."

The vicar laughed.

"At any rate," he said, "in the case of Averno, there was a good deal in the 'works' line. Now then, Caroline, where could you have been better handled than you were at Beverstoft?"

"Yes. Mr. Averno was all that was kind and hospitable, I admit. But——"

"But—— Well, where does the But come in?"

answered her brother. "Not only that—but he gave me the few days' shoot of my life—of my latter life, that is. And——"

"Oh, yes. You men think of nothing but killing things. You revert to your primitive savagery, when women were clubbed on the head and carried off as brides——"

Her audience spluttered, even Eva with her whole-souled adherence to The Cause.

"Well, and a good few women in these days would be glad to be carried off as brides, on the same terms," said the vicar, with a great laugh.

"Would they indeed?" Aunt Caroline was beginning to drum with her heels on the floor. "That sort of talk is simply disgusting."

"Well, get on to your tea and forget it," said her brother. "I must go out and officiate at Evensong directly. Steele's away on sick call. Any of you coming, by the way?"

"I'm not," said Aunt Caroline crisply. "I've got two back numbers of *Votes* to go through." But Hermione and Eva said they were. To the latter, the soothing plain chant in the half-lit choir, had just that effect, moreover she knew that her attendance pleased her father. And she felt extra like pleasing him just then, for she wanted to see Averno again, and was more glad than she really knew, that the prospective invite had been mooted when it had.

That sojourn of hers at Beverstoft, had been rather

—in fact, quite—a unique experience. The beautiful, invigorating side of the lovely country life, the no less invigorating side of a wholly new idea of character, and that under peculiarly unique circumstances, had taken a hold upon her. Peculiarly unique circumstances, because of its utter unconventionality. No one to consider, but the two of them who were making it their daily life. Their daily life! Exactly. That was it. Their daily life. And the odd part of it was, the said "daily life," though not much over a fortnight, seemed to have taken on the proportions of a quite respectable fraction of a lifetime—as the young consider it.

"Yes, Mr. Averno was very kind," went on Aunt Caroline. "But I must say that at times he was almost rude. I wanted him to read some of our literature, and I believe—yes, I'm almost certain I overheard him say he wouldn't do so for a bribe. Well, what do you think of that?" And the speaker sat up bristling, and again drummed with her heels on the floor, which process constitutes a sort of war challenge with "lovely woman."

"That's nothing, Aunt Caroline," said Hermione, the pacific. "I knew a novelist, one with a fair amount of record too, and his hostess told him she wouldn't read one of his books for a bribe, but her husband had got a shelf stocked full with them. Well, he didn't get his shirt out over that. He treated it as a howling joke."

"My dear Hermione, is that the way they teach

you to talk at Girton? No wonder you're slack in other ways."

"'In other ways' meaning The Cause," smiled Hermione sweetly. "Well, the point is—some don't want to read one kind of thing, and some do. That's where Mr. Averno comes in. See?"

Whether Mrs. Kaye saw or not is hypothetical. For present purposes she only snorted. But the younger ones laughed, and left her to her two arrear numbers of *Votes*.

In the badly-lighted suburban street, Eva's mind was fraught with contrast. A nasty, penetrating drizzle was falling, and the whole atmosphere emphasized the mud and ugliness, and chronically depressing gloom.

The dim light in the church, the six specks of flame from the tall candles on the high altar, the rhythm of the plain-song chant by the choir boys, and her father's cultured, melodious voice, as he intoned his part as officiant, was altogether in harmony with her frame of mind. It seemed to fit in with her mood and recollections. Her mind went back through it all to Beverstoft. She saw the mere, and the old tarred shed, she even began to revive the psychic influence she had felt within the latter. And then the soothing effects of peace and presence quelled the other, and however much she tried to—to tell the truth to herself, she didn't try much—it would not come back.

She was thinking of Averno alone. Somehow or

other the thought of him alone came home to her here more strikingly, goodness only knew why, but it did. Now, and at this time they had been coming home in the dusk or dark—only it was dusk there in the pure fresh open of the country, but here dark —with the rain plashing outside, and the horrid stucco of the rows of little sordid houses. She wondered what Averno was feeling like, alone—now. That fortnight—and over—had seemed to take up such a lot of life, to her, to both of them.

It was one of those contrasts of life. Here she had taken up her own again, there so different. The sweet, moist scent of the woodland was upon her, the walk home through darkling wood rides, while the little brown owls were uttering their fierce shrieks, as they hawked for their small prey over newly upturned plough or stubble, and the talk upon everything and anything. That very sweet, moist scent—what a deal it conjured up, and here, sordid stucco. And the strange new experience of a strange new companionship! Right outside everything, and in every way under unique circumstances. And the half-lighted church, and the six gleaming points from the tall candles on the high altar, sent a sort of far away spell over what seemed now a far away episode of the past.

She was conscious of hearing her father's intoning of the last prayers, and the choir's responding Amen, and then in a minute they were out in the street

again; the rainy, squalid, stucco-hemmed street; as she defined it.

The room they had left not much more than half-an-hour before, looked snug and warm. Aunt Caroline was still spread out over the fire in an aggressive attitude, summing up her back numbers of *Votes*.

"John," she broke out, looking up as they came in. "Listen to this. Asquith says——"

"Oh, confusioration take Asquith, and what he says," answered her brother, testily. "I don't care twopence what Asquith says—or anybody else. I say, though, we hadn't quite settled up about Averno. We'd better get him down next week—if he'll come. Say Tuesday?"

"Oh, I don't know," answered the other, peevishly. "You seem to have got this Mr. Averno on the brain, you and Eva. Well, do as you like about it."

"Well, I call that disgusting," said the vicar. "Here's a man who drags you out of a rotten hole, you've shoved yourself into, mind, and afterwards takes care of you as if you were his own kith and kin, and incidentally the same of Eva, and then you grudge my asking him here for a day or two. There's precious little inducement for him—or any one else—to come.

"H'm!" sniffed Mrs. Kaye. "Perhaps there is."

At this, Hermione smiled broadly, and exchanged glances with Eva. The latter, in spite of The Cause,

90269

was wont to get rather "fed up" with her tiresome old aunt at times. Now she broke out.

"Oh, bother all that. Of course we'll get him down—if he'll come, that is. Look here, Aunt Caroline, you're spoiling the whole show, by being sour over it. You won't win over the mere male by that. And then think how jolly we were at Beverstoft. Rather. And it's mean of you to turn on acidity to Mr. Averno on top of that."

"Jolly? Well, you seem to have been, but I don't know how I could have, after being bruised and battered about by a lot of ruffianly wretches who call themselves men. Men, indeed!"

"Never mind. It was the man who got us out of it, at any rate."

"Oh, yes. I'm tired of that parrot-talk. They have to make themselves useful at times, I suppose, otherwise they've no excuse for existing."

The speaker was usually venomous on the subject of the unornamental sex. Incidentally she was what is popularly known as a grass widow. She had a husband alive, but couldn't hit it off with him at any price, and had fallen back on her brother, for a home. The latter, having a pretty strong will of his own, had given her one on his own terms, which were that he should be absolutely master in it, and therein his daughters had seconded him. But he and his brother-in-law were very good friends, and lunched together at their mutual club whenever the vicar ran up to town. He never

did believe in taking up other people's quarrels, he would say; as to which, there was generally something to be said on both sides. People could work out their own differences between themselves, was his theory, and who shall say it was not a sound one? He himself, found his sister rather trying at times, especially on the subject of her latest craze. But then, people were none the worse for a hobby, and as long as she and the girls hit it off—which on the whole they did very fairly well—he was satisfied. After all, her particular hobby was less of a bore than that of the average elderly female who specializes on her own particular ailments.

CHAPTER X

OF SOME TALK

"DO you believe in 'influences,' Knight?"

"What do you mean by 'influences'?" answered the doctor, whose acquaintance we made when he was called in for the repairing of the elderly Suffragette.

"'Influences'?" answered Averno. "Why, sort of spirit business, and all that kind of thing."

"H'm!" said the doctor, crisply. "There's no doubt about the influence of spirits; usually with the common or indigent herd Whisky—and bad."

Averno laughed.

The two men had met on the village green, and were exchanging remarks in general.

"No, no," he said, "I'm not talking of grog. I'm talking of spiritual manifestations, 'elementals,' and all that sort of thing; by the way, I don't know what the devil an 'elemental' is, but I've heard a lot of gag about them among various women who

play at dabbling in witchcraft and all sorts of concerns, which they know no more about than you, for instance, do of my internal anatomy."

Averno and the doctor were very old friends, in fact, had been schoolfellows.

Said the latter—

"I don't know anything about your internal anatomy, as you say. How should I? But I can make a hard guess at it, and that is that you probably took on board your fair share of 'spiritual influences' last night, as we most of us do, be it recorded to our deadly shame and detriment. But now, anyway, Averno, what the devil are you trying to get at?"

"Why, get at? Well, to be brief—Shotworthy Shed."

"Well, what about Shotworthy Shed?"

"Oh, well, you know as well as I do, that silly old haunting yarn."

The other looked at him, and shook his head.

"I tell you what it is, Averno," he said, "you'll be beginning to need a specialist if you don't watch it. I've known you nearly all our lives, but—what's the matter with the Shotworthy Shed?"

"Now look here, old man," said Averno, "let's quit chaff for once. I want you to be serious now, I'm going to tell you something rather strange."

"Right. Fire away—no, don't fire away. Joliffe seems to be rather interested in the subject of our discussion."

Joliffe was an incidental labourer who never laboured. His wife did all that for him—in every sense. Instead he occasionally poached. Now, standing framed in his cottage door, he was contemplating the two conversationalists with some interest—interest took nothing out of him, you see. The said interest turned on the fact that he had twice caught the words, "Shotworthy Shed."

"Stroll down the road a little," went on Knight, and they turned away, to the intense disappointment of their listener, who had thought he was going to hear something to his advantage in the shape of retailing matter in the village pub. that evening, both spicy and unlooked for, that would bring him in at least a half-pint—free.

Strolling down the road, Averno put the doctor in possession of how he had found his younger guest in Shotworthy Shed, alone under the circumstances we have already narrated. Now he said: "What do you think of that?"

Knight said nothing, nothing in response to this, anyhow. He muttered a wholesouled curse as a motor-cycle, also containing a female, came within an inch of knocking him into the hedge, which seemed to constitute the joke of his life to the motor-bikist, and still more to the female.

Averno laughed.

"I'm always doing that myself, old chap," he said.

"I know you are. You ought to have contributed largely to a new *Dreadnought*, in fines," said Knight, sourly. "Well, now, about your younger guest and influences; don't you know what women are by this time? you are old enough and ugly enough to—no, I'm damned if you are the last by the way, there's a something about that long slouching length of yours, and bold, brigand-cum-conspirator like face, that's rather picturesque and up-to-date."

"Oh thanks, old chap. Spare my blushes, won't you? As you say—I'm old enough, and ugly enough to know what women are, but the worst of it is, that the older and uglier I get, the more I find out I don't. They are just like savages, in that the more you think you know them, the more you find out you don't."

Dr. Knight growled. He was a married man himself—he had to be, for the requirements of his profession, but—well, but——!

"As a matter rather outside professional interest, Averno, what did the young lady look like as you came upon her in the shed? Had she lost colour, did she look agitated—or what?"

"Fact is, both held good. She looked as if she might have seen the devil, and she's a strong-minded girl too, and looks it."

Knight shook his head with a sour expression on his face.

"Averno, beware of strong-minded females, or you'll rue it, the weaker-minded ones are more work-a-day in the long run, and give far less trouble." The speaker's legal consort happened to have a hooked nose, and an exceedingly commandeering disposition.

"Well now, Knight, what do you think of the whole joke? It certainly was rum."

"Yes, it was rum; if it had been the ordinary male I should have said it spelt whisky."

"Oh, damn it, can't you be serious for once? You are the only scientific man within the radius of five miles, and when I want to get a scientific opinion out of you, you start rotting. I want to get out of you what you think of the whole transaction—as a scientific man, don't you know, not as a laughing jackass. How's that?"

"'That' is this way, Averno. The whole thing simply spells hysteria. All women have hysteria, most of them are busting with it. This one, you say, is an ardent Suffragette. There you are, enthusiasm—enthusiasm, which is on the border line touching hysteria."

"Hysteria or not," said Averno, "she was plucky enough in the middle of those snarling, grimy sons of salt cod, where I first discovered her. But we are getting away from the point. Do you

seriously think there was anything behind the state of upset in which I found her ? "

" Certainly not, if you mean from a point of medical science. She was simply wound up. You know, Averno, she is young. I don't know how young she is, I should say nearly in the mid-twenties. At that time of life, the eternal feminine takes up these crazes, and runs them to death ; well, that has a relative action on their whole way of looking at things. Woman is a one-idea-ed being, you can take it from me."

" But I shan't take it at all from you, old chap," said Averno. " You've got hold of the wrong end of the stick altogether, in my humble opinion. They have plenty of ideas—bar the fools—and you find those in both sexes, notably in clubs."

Knight stopped short in his walk, looked at his friend, then turned.

" I tell you what it is, Averno," he said. " You've got it."

" Got what ? "

" You've got it badly," chuckled the doctor.

" H'm ! have I ? " said Averno. " But doesn't it strike you all this time, that you have been showing an utterly feminine lack of proportion. Here I've been trying to draw you on the scientific and psychic side of this shed business—as a scientific man, mind you—and all I can get out of you on the subject is a most infernally prosy lecture on feminine characteristics."

The doctor felt disgusted, but he and Averno, be it remembered, had been at school together, and passages of chaff and friendly recrimination, of ten occurred between them. So he said—

"Well, Averno, you asked my opinion, and you've got it, and now you've got it you don't think much of it, but that's not an uncommon complaint, as I find in my experience of twelve years G.P. round here."

"Well," was the answer. "I don't know much about this psychic business, but Miss Passinghame looked simply knocked when I came to the shed and found her there. Now what the devil should have made her want to go into that old pigsty for at all. There must have been some attracting 'influence,' as the spiritists call it."

"Attracting skittles," said the other, sourly.

"But when she got in, why should she have been affected as she was?"

"Hysteria, sheer hysteria. Imagination did the rest. If you want any further diagnosis of the thing, what you'd better do is to run up to town and squander as many guineas as you are fool enough to do on some of these quacks who deal in globes and crystal-gazing."

"I shan't do that," said Averno, "because they are no good. I've known more than one untrousered savage—a professional magician, don't you know—in savage parts, who'd astonish your or my scep-

ticism. But the white man up-to-date, in London, hasn't reached their psychic ability."

"Oh, never mind about untrousered savages," said Knight sourly, "I don't undertake to diagnose on them. You got at me on that shed of yours, and the young lady who got an imaginary scare. She's a handsome girl, but—looks rather strong-minded," the last words spoken slowly.

"Well," said Averno, as they got back to the village, "I am going down to stay with her people to-morrow for a mid-week—not a week-end, but a mid-week. Now you know, Knight, as character student that speaks well for old Passinghame."

"Why?" said Knight.

"Why, because it shows that he is a sensible sort of parson. It shows that if he asked me for the week-end, he'd think I might be expected to go to church, because of being there on Sunday, but he deduces that I evidently don't want to go, and incidentally I don't, so he asks me in the mid-week. Now there's a sensible sort of parson for you."

"H'm, yes," said Knight. "That's quite jolly, Averno, yes, quite jolly; but you are not obliged to tell the young lady of my diagnosis of her in the shed, because if so she wouldn't love me a bit the next time she comes down here, and I shouldn't like that, you know, because you and I have been pals all our lives, and it would be a pity if——"

"Oh, don't be a jackass, Knight," and the speaker

broke off. "Now will you and Mrs. Knight come and take pot-luck this evening. No bother about dressing, I never do unless I have a big crowd, as you know. I shan't undertake to play bridge with you, because in the first place, I hold that the evening is the very last time adapted for mathematical exercises, in the next I've never learnt to play it."

"Oh thanks," said the other, "I think we could manage it. The missis would be delighted; she gets rather dull at times, stuck at home all by herself."

They parted where they had met, at the village cross-roads.

Averno betook himself home with a secret and certain amount of gladness at heart. He had received a letter from Dr. Passinghame that morning, containing a cordially worded invite to come over to Comptonswick vicarage next week, from Tuesday to Friday, or Monday, if he liked to stay over.

Averno had come to no slowly deliberated conclusion that he would so stay over.

We have dwelt at some length on how he had missed Eva, when she and her aunt had left him. By the way, we dwelt on the fact that he had had very little of the aunt, and all of Eva.

Eva had also written him by the same post as her father. It was a delightful little letter, and if such had been needed, would have revived a longing

to be under the same roof with her—which incidentally is a very different thing to *seeing* any one again.

And now this was going to come about.

CHAPTER XI

THE CLERESTORY

AVERNO went to Comptonswick next to Burbleton, as duly arranged. He raced his thundering express engine as usual, along the peaceful country roads, to the imminent risk to life and limb of his Majesty's lieges, through a county and a half, which lay between Beverstoft and Burbleton, but after all, that was Averno's way ; once he got on board his aforesaid huge, abominable express engine he was completely oblivious to the fact that other people and their animal possessions had lives to lose. Incidentally he only slew two fowls, and cut off the tail of a mongrel cur, and ran the risk of trial for manslaughter, during his progress of a couple of hours or so. But he fetched up at Burbleton all right without further mishap, and so to Comptonswick vicarage.

He got out of his panting, snorting machine, and with his usual insatiable energy hauled down his bag and suit case, without waiting for anybody to do it for him.

His welcome was an unusual one, for it was so absolutely unstudied and cordial. The whole family was in the hall to welcome him, there was no waiting for him to be marshalled into a drawing-room, and sit there till some one came in. Averno liked this. Here they were all so jolly and friendly and unaffectedly glad to see him. He had seen too much of the other thing—on *this* side of the equator—and he did not like it.

"Well, Doctor, how are you?" he cried in his breezy way, and while some one relieved him of his big coat, he clinched a cordial handclasp with the vicar, and all in turn. Even with Aunt Caroline it was cordial, perhaps the result of a subtle pass on from Eva's dark eyes. Perhaps the same cause made him ejaculate mischievously—

"Votes for Women!"

Hermione laughed.

"Mr. Averno," she said, "don't talk 'shop the first thing on crossing the threshold. It's unlucky."

"Come into *my* den, Averno," said the vicar. "After a long, cold ride like yours, a man wants something warming. You see I haven't forgotten the lesson you taught me, when *I* had had a long, cold ride."

As a matter of fact Averno would rather have followed the units—or perhaps one unit—of the ornamental sex, as there represented, wherever that entity might, for present purposes, happen to

be camped. But he didn't believe in quenching zeal—or hospitality; the latter a rare enough article in his experience, so he followed his host into his study.

The latter was a snug room, mostly papered, with well crammed bookshelves. A bright fire was burning and before it a small table which set forth a sparkle of glass, and *other things*—which caught and radiated points of light.

"This is very jolly and snug, Doctor," said Averno, lighting his pipe, as he subsided into a roomy armchair, and throwing a glance round the room. The latter, by the way, bar its crammed tiers of bookshelves, was not particularly ecclesiastical in appearance; on the contrary wherever space afforded, the walls held various sporting prints representing the masterly way of knocking down a woodcock or gaffing a salmon. With this the priestly-looking figure of Dr. Passinghame in his cassock didn't altogether seem in keeping.

"I know what you are thinking, Averno," said the vicar with a chuckle. "You are thinking that this room is an incongruity? I can tell you, a lot of my clerical colleagues think the same. I've seen more than one look down his nose when he comes into it, but when they do, what do you think *I* do? Why, pull open that drawer, that one there, and show them a set of vestments, that makes their mouths water. It took a prize at the Paris

Exhibition. That takes the taste of the other out of their mouths. Ha! ha!"

Averno laughed responsively.

"Well, Doctor," he said, "I don't see why on earth, because a man is a cleric, he shouldn't be a sportsman too. '*Mens sana in corpore sano*,' as the old classical chestnut has it."

"That's sense," said the other, taking a fresh pipe from the pile on his writing table and filling it. "I don't think there is anything deteriorating to any man in looking back to the clean, fresh, healthy sport of his younger days. Do you?"

"So far not," said Averno, "that I hope you will have some 'clean, fresh, healthy sport' in your—er—middle-aged days."

"Oh, you needn't have halted at it, Averno," answered the vicar with a laugh. "You might just as well have said 'in your old-age days' while you were about it."

"Ah well, they say a man is only as old as he feels or a woman, I forget which, and you certainly didn't look as if you felt it when you were out with me," was the answer.

So they went on talking in a desultory kind of way, with regard to sport and a few other things. And then a bell rang. Averno glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece.

"If you don't mind, Doctor," said he, "I'd better go and get into my evening kit. I take a beastly long time over that job, and I don't want to create

a bad impression by keeping the ladies waiting on the very first evening of my arrival."

When he came down half an hour later Averno found Aunt Caroline alone. As usual she was discontented and—at once gave vent to it.

"I can't get those girls to come down in anything like time, Mr. Averno," she said. "They simply won't. Eva's the worst of them."

"Votes for Women," quoted Averno slily. "What do you think, Mrs. Kaye? You'll be making a convert of me directly."

For answer he got a very hostile glare.

"It isn't funny to make a joke about a most serious Cause," she snapped. "But you *men* think it's funny to say anything idiotic."

What Averno might or might not have answered, history cannot record, for at that moment the missing and vituperated pair entered. Hermione looked soft and soothing in some wondrous blue confection which suited her gold hair and blue eyes in an indefinable sort of a way, which being indefinable we shall not attempt to describe. Eva in a wondrous gold array, her dark eyes alight and sparkling—well, the same held good of her.

"Here we are," said the latter breezily. "Been waiting long, Aunt Caroline?"

"I should think so, and your father isn't here yet."

Averno caught Eva's liquid dark eyes and he smiled.

"I won't say it," he said in a dry undertone, and at that moment Dr. Passinghame came in.

But at table they settled down to a very jolly and merry party indeed. True, Aunt Caroline began to bore Averno with searching questions as to political economy, but he fenced that; then she tried him on the alleviation of the sufferings of the masses, to which he replied that he preferred to turn his attention to the sufferings of the classes; and they had plenty to suffer in all conscience. And then the two girls took a hand in the game, and talked about out-door fun in various phases, wherein he was thoroughly at home as was his host, and so Aunt Caroline, with her confounded, boring, dry-as-dust seriosity of questions, was counted out and liked Averno still less. The man had no intellect, she decided. He was just one of those stupid brutes who lived to kill things. She forgot incidentally that he had come precious near killing more than one "thing" during the few minutes in which he had had the honour of making her acquaintance, but that is a detail.

During the evening Averno did not say much. He left the talk mostly to other people, as his way often was; but if he did not talk he was taking impressions, and the chief of these impressions spelt Eva. The character of a girl can be gauged pretty accurately from her home life; from her unstudied home life; and this he was setting himself to gauge.

The result was in all respects satisfactory. She seemed on the best of terms with everybody; with her father, who did not agree in the least with her latest craze; with her sister, who didn't either; and, stranger still, with her boring, tiresome old aunt who did. That to him struck the most unlikely note of all.

Another note that occurred to Averno was the contrast between this snug bright home and the sordidness, almost squalor, of its surroundings outside. Now how had that been compassed, he thought, since surroundings have such an insidious and powerful effect upon all the circumstances of one's everyday life? Yet here these people seemed to live impervious to their surroundings. Why they might have been his next-door neighbours in some snug rectory away by Beverstoft, with the grand, free, open wind from the North Sea blowing health and ozone around them, to the rustling murmur of growing corn spangled with scarlet poppies, and the sough of tossing woods.

Then his glance concentrated on the two girls, each in her different type of attractiveness. The one glowing and sparkling, the other placid and soothing, furnished the key to the whole problem. Both spelt harmony. The elderly Suffragist and her brother, the vicar, would have spelt discord; discord unredeemed; but these two, as he studied them now, and that carefully, closely, shrewdly, would make the brightening of any home. And

so the evening went by, and he went to bed under the impression that it was one of the very pleasantest that he had ever spent in his life.

In the morning Dr. Passinghame was awakened with a sorely uncomfortable misgiving as to what he should do to entertain or amuse his guest.

He need have been under no apprehension on that score, for the two girls took charge of him at once. The first thing they did was to take him into Burbleton: the next thing was to insist on taking him round the Cathedral.

Averno had an artistic eye, as we have seen from his strong love of country effects, therefore he didn't unappreciate the Cathedral, though he didn't altogether appreciate the "showing over" verger. That official he soon got rid of, on terms which inspired the said official with amazed satisfaction. Then he said with relief—

"Let's go somewhere we oughtn't to go. Up top, for instance."

Hermione, the placid, smiled and shook her head—her smile was decidedly and insidiously an attractive one. But Eva's dark eyes sparkled and her face lit up.

"Oh yes. Let's," she said. "We'll get up into the clerestory. I know the door's open because the lock's broken and they haven't repaired it."

"Well, I shan't go," said Hermione. "It's

far too much fag climbing those stairs. I'll wait for you here."

The two went. They came out on the clerestory. Once there, the same instinct which had prompted Averno to go where he had no business to go, at any rate without an official attendant, prompted him now to do something wholly wild and idiotic, it was about on a par with the way he sent his infernal express engine law-breaking along the road at any number of miles an hour. So what does he do but jump on the stone balustrade and begin doing a sort of tight-rope walk, some sixty feet above a ditto constructed pavement. He was all wire and whipcord and electricity was this character, and you never knew when he would let the latter off; and when he did, it was at all sorts of unexpected times and in all sorts of unexpected places, and then he enjoyed it, as for instance in the course of the ruction wherein he had first made Eva's acquaintance.

The latter now was more than alarmed.

"Take care," she cried, as he began doing a sort of two-step time along the balustrade. "For goodness' sake, drop that and come down. It makes one feel seasick."

"Oh, I'm all jolly. I rather like this."

"Yes, do you? But if you go overboard you won't fall into the sea, nor yet into a haystack. Oh, do come down."

There was a snarl from the organ. It was time

for the afternoon service, and the voluntary was starting which should play the choristers and clerics in.

"I can do a double step time to this," said Averno madly. Then his foot slipped and he slid like lightning over the parapet halfway—when he was seized. He was hanging, half of him over a sixty-foot drop, with the hard paving underneath waiting to receive him. Eva's strong young muscular power was taxed to the uttermost to hold him, for in his slip and fall he had gone over on to his back on the balustrade and consequently had no hand grip of his own, but with a mighty effort, thanks to her strong young athleticism, she had drawn him over the balancing point, and he alighted beside her into safety again.

The girl stood with heightened colour, and her breast heaving. The man stood with quickened pulses after his recent peril. In the semi-gloom of the clerestory they stood and faced each other.

"Good God! Eva," he said, "you've saved my silly life. Now take charge of it, will you—altogether—always I mean. Do you understand?"

That was Averno all over—nothing if not quick, gusty, but unlike most quick gusty characters he invariably meant what he said or did.

She looked at him for a moment without answering. The glow in her eyes deepened and her breathing came more quickly.

"I don't know," she said. "I don't know—but,

I wonder if I am safe in saying I would? Yes," her voice softening, "I think I might, I've seen so much of you; not for so long, but under exceptional circumstances and——"

"Beg pardon, sir, but no one is allowed up here at this time," said a voice. It belonged to another verger than the one who had shown them round before.

"Oh damn!" ejaculated Averno, with a whole-souled though forgetful disregard for the sanctity of the place. The columns and aisles were dim in the semi-gloom. The spot where they stood was rather out of the way and ideal, and yet this officious beast breaks in and upsets everything.

Averno felt as if he could have thrown him over the parapet on to the spot from which he had been so narrowly rescued from pulverizing himself. The official preceded them severely down the steps. They found Hermione sitting waiting for them.

"You people have been a long time up there," she said with an amused smile, but, womanlike, she refrained from adding, "What on earth have you been doing with yourselves all the time?"

It will be seen from the foregoing that Dr. Passinghame need have been under no sort of apprehension as to what he should do with his guest.

CHAPTER XII

UNDERSTANDING

THE inside of the week that Averno spent at Comptonswick vicarage seemed like a dream; one of the pleasantest episodes he could rake out of a long and misspent career, as he used to say jocosely.

He was a lonely man, not given to making friends, but somehow these who had been sprung upon him by the merest accident, rang so true. He had been in far and wild countries. He had taken his life in his hand, on a few occasions. He had sat in the huts of fine savages, conversing with them animatedly through a hot—or cold—night, on war and the chase, and other things, and had been thoroughly at home. Yet on his return to his own country, and comparative affluence, he seemed to have got into a sort of loneliness. Every one he ran into or who ran against him were stiff and buckramed up with hide-bound ideas and traditions. They seemed choked with rule of thumb. Supposing he was making a stay at some one else's house and he didn't come down at the bang of a gong they

looked uncomfortable, and that made him uncomfortable too, and he didn't see why the devil he should be made uncomfortable. So by degrees he had dropped off going to other people's houses, and usually invented some conventional lie in order to get out of doing so. Now, in some one else's house, he had struck an entirely new experience. He felt entirely at home. The vicar had begun by thinking what on earth he was going to do to entertain him, but in the sequence he was unconsciously and really entertaining him; for the very simple reason that he and the rest of the household automatically made it clear to Averno that he might do just exactly what he liked, or not do what he didn't like—a very rare thing indeed in people who entertain others in their own houses. Even old Aunt Caroline, with her lecturing on The Cause and political economy, he managed to stand, while Dr. Passinghame, with his cultured mind and sense of humour, was a most delightful companion and host, and the two girls, contrasts as they were, were the chief delight of this charmed circle. And here was a very oasis of light and harmony planted down in the midst of a rather sordid and stucco suburb.

Averno had put up his car in a garage on the outside of Burbleton, the nearest thing of the kind he could get to Comptonswick; and he would take the two girls out for long runs, from sordid stuccodom, for miles and miles of lovely English

country. The vicar wouldn't join them though asked. He said he was too old and generally in too "unprepared" a state to risk his precious neck. Aunt Caroline wouldn't go. She said her life was too valuable to "The Cause." So he took the two girls alone, which he preferred. He would have been glad of the company of the vicar, but he wasn't sorry to dispense with that of Aunt Caroline, and uncommonly jolly runs they had. And he found the girls perfectly delightful. He was not young enough nor old enough to stickle for monopolizing Eva, wherefore he took her sister's presence on these occasions as a matter of course, and in fact by no means found it a detrimental element. The two together, in their different ways, were so bright and companionable, that it made a pleasure out of the whole thing. He had not got his chauffeur with him on these occasions, so that they could all talk freely and untrammelled. His Majesty's subjects were in more or less peril on the road, to say nothing of dogs and poultry, but we—like Averno—have nothing to do with such but only with Averno. So the days went by, not wore by, and he had made up his mind decidedly to stay over Monday as the appendix to Dr. Passinghame's invite had it.

When he went to bed on Saturday evening he was wondering what on earth he was going to do with his lonely life when he got back to Beverstoft Manor after all the brightness and cheerfulness that

he had experienced here. How was he going to sit down to table day in day out all alone? Why shouldn't Eva marry him at once? Engagements were skittles, the two of them had known each other long enough—under exceptional circumstances—to know their own minds, and their said own minds had seemed to agree up there in the semi-gloom of the clerestory of the cathedral. What the devil was the use of putting off things? There, you see, was Averno; hard hammer on the nail, and who shall say it isn't a good phase of human character when directed by a hard keen brain behind it? He hadn't said anything as yet to his host nor had Eva. He thought he would to-morrow, but, would the vicar object to him on the ground of non-religion, not necessarily irreligion but non-religion, he wondered?

The while, as he lay in bed, not able to go to sleep for he seemed strangely perturbed over this same question, he thought what if it should be so? There was no telling. Parsons were apt to be narrow-minded directly they were touched on that point, but somehow this one had struck him as being possibly rather an exception. "Scratch a cleric and a bigot bleeds" had been a sardonic epigram which he had made up for himself; and yet—this one in particular had struck him as rather an exception.

"Are you going to church with us, Mr. Averno?"

said Aunt Caroline at the breakfast table. "It's the Sunday in the octave of All Saints, you know," which he didn't, "and we shall have rather more of a ceremony than usual."

"Why certainly, Mrs. Kaye," he answered with a laugh, and a comical glance at Eva. "It would be rotten etiquette to be staying at a parson's house and not go to church, wouldn't it, but some one will have to take care of me because I won't know my way about," with another quick humorous glance at Eva.

"Oh, we'll soon show you your 'way about,'" said Hermione, "though I can tell you there are plenty of people who come here and say they don't know their way about."

The point came in later. When Averno found himself walking up the aisle of the Church of the Holy Cross of the district of Comptonswick beside the two girls, he stared. He had never seen anything quite like it before. The building was a lofty and imposing one. An acolyte in scarlet and white was lighting up the six tall candles on the high altar as he found himself piloted to a seat in the front row. "I shall now get an uninterrupted view of the proceedings," he whispered to Eva, "and if there is anything to see, one may as well see it."

There was plenty to see, as they got into their seats. The organ snarled forth melodiously, then the acolytes and choristers and celebrant entered—

the latter, Dr. Passinghame. They filed into the choir, and the celebrant, attired in a rich cope, standing at the high altar, put incense into the thurible. The procession started; the cross-bearer and acolytes with lighted candles, and then the thurifer in front swinging his censer high in the air, the choristers singing a stirring hymn. Banners at intervals floated overhead, all in stately and harmonious progress. The procession made a complete circuit of the church and re-entered the choir, and then the celebrant, having re-vested, ascended to the high altar and the service began.

Averno was watching the ceremonial with increasing interest. He had been inclined to look upon this sort of thing as bosh, now he began to look upon it as rather impressive. The mind of the man who took such intense delight in country effects began to be impressed, from an artistic point of view, with these effects. As the service proceeded, there was a certain amount of mystery and artistic effect, in the movings about and groupings of those concerned in it; and when at the culminating point of the solemnity the bell rang and the celebrant, beyond a row of lighted candles, dimly seen through clouds of incense raised the white Host aloft, Averno began to take the sense of it all—from an artistic point of view, if only that the religion of beauty appealed to him more than the religion of ugliness, which latter was the one to which he had been brought

up in his childhood and had consistently loathed ever since.

He certainly had not known his "way about" but Eva had taken care of him, faithful to her promise. She had pushed two or three books into his hand at intervals, when this or that was being sung with which he wasn't in the least acquainted, but it didn't matter, the whole ceremony impressed him; the colouring and stateliness of it. The priest in his gleaming vesture, the groupings of the acolytes in scarlet and white; the fine chancel dim with incense, and the lights glowing through, made up a wonderful picture, he decided. He had never felt devotional in his life, but now he began to wonder if there was anything in it. And around and behind was the most commonplace congregation you could have picked out from anywhere, all drawn from the outside stucco surroundings. Yet the combination of artistic ceremonial totally outside his experience, and the presence of the girl next to him, made up an effect as though he had got into another world. There was something about the very chant which took him out of himself, hard-headed, rushing man as he was by natural temperament.

"Well, Mr. Averno, what did you think of the service?" said Aunt Caroline when they met at lunch.

"To tell you the truth, Mrs. Kaye, I liked it, liked it very much;" thereupon the speaker went

up by leaps and bounds in that elderly Suffragette's opinion, and he had been nowhere in it before, as we have seen.

"Oh, you did?" said Hermione.

"Certainly," he said, "I don't know much about it, but I prefer the religion of beauty to the religion of ugliness, and artistically—well, it was artistic."

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the vicar, "and yet some people call it Tommy-rot."

"Oh well, Doctor, the world is very full of fools," said Averno. "Any show that's properly stage-managed, if you'll excuse me putting it on such a low plane, can't possibly come under the denomination of Tommy-rot, whether the people approve of it doctrinally or not. As a matter of fact artistically, that tall crucifix between two lighted candles coming through the dimness from the incense clouds thrown up by the man in front, from a swinging glittering thing hung on chains, was absolutely effective."

"Well done, Mr. Averno," said Hermione. "That description of yours is likewise absolutely effective. We shall have to get you to write a report of it, as our Special Commissioner."

"Oh well," he said jocosely, "I can't write a report of anything, but I'll carry a very vivid impression of this morning's function and Dr. Passinghame like Aaron in all his glory—or hold hard, wasn't it Solomon, or somebody else?"

There was a shout of laughter and the vicar's

was the loudest of the lot. The only one who didn't join in was Aunt Caroline. She looked down her nose. Averno was getting profane, she began to think.

"All serene, Averno," said his host, "we are going to have another function to-night. You come along and I'll rig you up as one of the banner bearers. I'll find some clothes that'll fit you down to the ground."

"Oh, Lord—no thanks!" said Averno, with a sort of mental jump. "That sort of thing isn't at all in my line. I shouldn't know what to do next."

"But there's no 'next' to do," laughed Dr. Passinghame. "All you've got to do is to march behind other people."

"'Down to the ground,' you said. That's just it. No, no thanks. I draw the line at getting into clothes I couldn't walk in."

They all laughed except Aunt Caroline. She was still scandalized.

* * * * *

It was Averno's last evening at Comptonswick vicarage, he had availed himself of Dr. Passinghame's invite to stay over Monday. Now he wished it was to Monday week, and yet, all things considered, he and Eva had been very little alone together. Wherever they had been Hermione had generally been with them, and to-morrow he was leaving. He hated leaving. What would he do with him-

self now alone at Beverstoft? He thought he would simply hate his own company and loneliness. Why shouldn't Eva marry him at once? he thought again. Engagements were idiotic when people understood each other.

That evening in the study when the two men were alone together smoking the comfortable pipe, Averno began by being rather silent. The vicar noticed this as it was contrary to custom.

"Why, what's the matter with you, Averno?" he said. "You seem a bit off colour."

The other got up and took two or three long strides up and down the room.

"I daresay I do, Doctor," he broke out, in his usual bull-at-a-gate manner. "The fact is I want to marry your daughter Eva."

"The deuce you do," said the vicar. "Since when have you put up that sort of arrangement?"

"Why, we put it up in the clerestory of the Cathedral at Burbleton."

"Oh, did you indeed? It was a precious gloomy place to put it up in," with a dry laugh. "And what did she say?"

"She said she would—and what do *you* say, Doctor?"

The vicar struck a fresh match and relighted his pipe deliberately.

"I don't know, Averno. If you've both made up your minds that you suit each other, you're both old enough to know your minds, but——"

"Well, what's the but?" said the other, still pacing the study in long strides.

The older man looked at him, and his voice took on a serious tone, the first time Averno had known him take on a serious tone in talking with him.

"I've gathered from several remarks you've let fall, that you've no sort of belief."

"Well, to tell you the truth, Doctor, I haven't much. But no sort of want of belief would for a moment weigh with influencing Eva's belief or—that of any who might come after us."

Dr. Passinghame looked at him for half a minute.

"That'll do, Averno," he said. "I think we know each other," and the two men gripped hands.

"By the way," said the latter drily, "a man whose very name means '*in Tartarus*' might be excused a degree of unorthodoxy!"

"*Facilis descensus Averni*," quoted the other with a meaning laugh.

CHAPTER XIII

THE CALF-SKIN BOOK

AVERNO was at home again, and, somehow, life was not the same thing. In fact it was totally different. Every day he felt more sick of it and of himself. That week at Comptonswick vicarage had seemed to clean unsettle him—Comptonswick vicarage, be it remembered, in a desert of mean stucco houses, yet it held a something, a somebody. Now in the solemn beauties of his own fields and woods—he had owned a great many more fields and woods than he owned here in other parts of the world, but somehow here it was different—he felt as if he had dropped out.

And now finding himself alone once again, various misgivings began to come over him. It seemed to his natural rushing temperament that Eva had not been sufficiently responsive even when they had exchanged farewells; although this was in the presence of other people. Her demeanour had not been quite all he thought it might have been. There are subtle lights and shades in that kind of thing,

of course, wherein neither of the parties concerned need give themselves away, and yet still convey the *idea*; and this is just what Eva hadn't done.

Averno got out a gun and wandered down into a covert: he didn't care in the least about rule of thumb where gunning was concerned. If he wanted to shoot a bird or two or a hare or a few snipe, he simply slung on a game bag and took a gun and a spaniel and went and did it. We have heard that he was one of those rarities who believed in doing what you liked. He had once had a keeper who wanted him to do what *he* liked in the shoot line, but Averno told him straight on end that he'd got to do what *he* liked, or go to the devil, or wherever *he* liked. If he wanted to take out a gun and cut down a bird or two, he wasn't going to be hide-bound by idiotic traditions of "beats," and their limitations, and people who had to be there at a certain time, and all that. No. He owned a good shoot for its particular proportions, a record limit of a shoot; and if he wanted to go out and shoot at any time he went out and shot, totally irrespective of other people—of other people having to be there at any precise hour, which hour might or might not have suited his convenience on that occasion.

He whistled up Stirrup, the little Clumber, and went out. He didn't want a keeper in attendance, he preferred to be alone. His thoughts were running

on Eva, and they were also running on sport, then the latter predominated.

He came to the head of the mere. A red gold sunset was shedding gloriously over the water and the growth at its edge. He stood and waited. Presently the swish of wings overhead against the darkling sky as the flighting duck came over. A couple of shots rapped out also, corresponding to a couple of splashes in the water as a pair of duck came down, each stone dead, and to be retrieved by Stirrup, the little Clumber.

Averno stood there and waited for more, thinking of the bright surroundings he had just left and his own solitude, which in itself was absolutely enviable from every point of view whatever. Yet the fool at this moment was positively dissatisfied with it. He hadn't a pecuniary care in the world. He had just as much income as he wanted. He owned a slice of one of the world's beauty spots; even now, he was enjoying some untrammelled sport—for wild duck in the dusk take a lot of hitting—and yet he was vaguely discontented, and—all about one girl and that on vague grounds.

How often he and this one girl had gone over this same ground together; it had been one of their favourite walks, down the road by the mere in the glow of the dying sunlight with the old ruined cottage on the left. He remembered pointing out the sunset glow and the effect on the mere, which reflected it scarcely less luridly than the glow in the sky. He recalled

the tang of the fresh frosty autumn air, at the time of year when the English country with its absolute charm all the year round is by no means at its worst. There was the soft haze on the changing leafage; a sort of indefinable autumn scent from ground and tree; and his then companion's bright sparkling face, with the glow of health, walking beside him. And now it didn't somehow seem quite so satisfying as it had seemed then. Why?

For the life of him he couldn't tell, it was subtle—subtle, and that was the only possible explanation. The dusk had deepened. Again the swish of wings came over; again the two barrels barked forth. This time there was only one splash into the mere—we can't hit every time you know.

Averno came to the conclusion that three duck would do for one evening, so when Stirrup had retrieved the third, he put them in the bag and went back to the house. When he got there he was disgusted. The post had come in and as usual there were nineteen letters out of twenty that he did not in the least want to see, and the twentieth wasn't there.

Eva and he had stood at the head of the mere and shot duck, or rather he had shot duck and she had missed them, for he had tried to teach her to shoot. Now he had come in, and the former association was strong on him. He had been doing the thing alone this evening. The swish-swish of the wild ducks' wings, in their swift flight against the

dusking sky, had brought back the sparkle of her eager eyes when she had let off both barrels and might have hit High Heaven but certainly nothing else.

Well that was all over, and he started now to wonder how he could get her down here again, as he sat alone in his den in the evening. He had had no letter from her, and he felt disgusted. Why the devil didn't she write him one? he thought in his gusty sort of way. He would have liked to have had one, and to have read it then in his loneliness; for he felt lonely just then, very lonely. He began to think of things. Why hadn't she written to him? he repeated again to himself, and the idea set him wondering, and that not in a pleasant direction. Had he made a mistake? As said before she had struck him as being rather irresponsive. That set Averno off into one of his nasty moods, and he sometimes got into them. And when he did they were very nasty moods indeed.

He came to the conclusion that he would race his infernal express motor engine across a county and a half to-morrow to Comptonswick vicarage. Then he decided that he wouldn't be any such damn fool at all. If people didn't think him worth bothering about, well it was idiocy to think them worth bothering about and he wouldn't do anything of the sort.

He got up and began restlessly to pace the room. In the said room were various bookshelves containing various books. By some curious force or what you like, his glance lighted on one. It was a wretched

little volume bound in old calf skin, but why he should have been impelled to take down that volume, bound in calf skin, no one could have told, let alone himself; but he did and he opened it at haphazard. It was printed in old-fashioned type, with "f's" for "s's" and catch words at the bottom of each page.

"Eventide. Red sunset. 25. ē. Wood and water. Renewal," was what he read.

He looked further down the book. It dealt with the art of sorcery mostly. He had never noticed it before on the shelf and now the contents struck him, what he had glanced at, as not particularly inspiring. Somehow the words at which he had just opened the book hit him. He felt in a curiously psychic vein. His first thoughts ran to the tarred shed. He stared at the words in the book. Were they "words of power" he wondered, and by a curious and utterly inexplicable vein of thought he decided that he would put them to the test, if they were "words of power." Eva had always professed a belief in such. Then he told himself it was idiotic. He didn't believe in that sort of thing altogether, and yet, and yet he couldn't get rid of some "influence." He did not know what it was, but the "influence" was there all the same.

He had been intending to have the tarred shed cut down or burnt down, and yet something of the same "influence" had warned him not to, which was exactly in keeping with Eva's idea as we have

heard it expressed. "What if this 'elemental should transfer itself into your house?" she had said.

He looked again at the dusty little calf-bound book he had taken from the shelf. It was a curious thing that he should have opened it at these seemingly inconsequent words, he was no believer in '*sortes liturgicæ*.' But in his then frame of mind, simply charged with the occult, it seemed to him that the words might be "words of power."

He dined as usual, Mrs. Blondell and one maid-servant looking after his wants; then through the long, slow, lonely evening he felt sick of himself. He had grown so accustomed to Eva's lively, breezy, homely chat what time her tiresome, boring old aunt was lying upstairs in bed, by-the-bye being exceedingly well taken care of. Now, alone after these changed conditions, he began to think of things. He felt unusually restless.

What sort of queer fascination drew him back to that little calf-bound silly book? Averno didn't exactly scoff at the occult; he had been in other countries, as we have said, wild and savage; and there he had seen people, wild and savage, doing things in the occult that the average man in any one of his clubs would simply hoot at the very idea of.

He had heard of other similar feats which he did not feel inclined to hoot at in the very least—having seen. Now he went to the shelf in the library and looked out that book again. Here was a miracle

in sortilegy. There was the same thing staring him in the face, "Eventide. Red sunset. 25. ♑, Wood and water. Renewal." Now what the devil did that mean combined with the thread of his thought? In some curious psychical line, the connexion associated itself with the tarred shed.

Averno had finished his dinner, and feeling restless concluded to take a walk. Down through the solemn woodlands, to the tune of melodious hootings of beautiful soft-pinioned owls, he went. Down by the moon-glittered water of the mere, down by the old ruined cottage by his right, which incidentally he intended to have rebuilt, and a little further on, on the edge of the wood, stood the tarred shed. He went in. He hadn't bothered to dress for dinner as his wont was when he was alone. He stood there in his frieze shooting knicker suit, a perfectly fine specimen of the English sportsman. He looked round the place and wondered what on earth it could have to do with some silly book he had found in his library. Here was a place where one cad had murdered another and in due sequence buried him, years ago, he told himself. And yet he was bothered by some silly words in a book he had picked up by chance, to come and interview the place again.

Then he recalled Eva's trepidation when he had found her there on that evening some time back, but to tell the truth the incidental business of the finding her there hadn't enhanced his opinion of Eva. He thought the whole idea idiotic. How

any sane woman, let alone a strong-minded, dark-eyed Suffragette, could possibly let herself be bothered with a tinpot country legend like that was utterly beyond him. The woodland scents came moist to his nostrils in the yellow glow of the moon. He seated himself on some sort of stick and stone in the tarred shed and started thinking. The owls were hooting outside and he could see the yellow moon and the beautiful glow over the woodland trees. Then the whole effect began to take possession of him, but——

He missed a presence, the presence which had since been associated with him here in these parts of his own owning, and that presence was a county and a half away. Well, why shouldn't he have that presence? He felt disgusted now at having to go about alone. Why shouldn't she be here with him now? There was no reason on earth why she shouldn't except some silly idiotic idea of conventional bosh which spelt engagement. Oh, damn all that! He would ramp over to-morrow in his beastly, animal-slaying, murder machine and carry off Eva by force—he had forgotten the British law as to banns and special licence, but that was a mere detail. He just reckoned that Eva and he could get fixed up—with any amount of ceremonial that Dr. Passinghame chose to turn on, incense and the rest of it—he didn't care, he simply wanted her. He lighted a fresh pipe, then looked round the shed again preparatory to starting off home.

As he did so a curious frame of mind came over

him and it related to Eva. She believed in all sorts of "the occult" he did not—much. Yet somehow there a sort of "influence" seemed to intrude itself. Sitting on this mouldering roller stone or whatever it might be, he became conscious of a Something. He got up and walked up and down, puffing vigorously at his pipe. Yet somehow or other he did not leave the shed. Why did he not? he thought to himself. There was something curious about it certainly. He would have the whole rotten thing tumbled down to-morrow, done away with altogether, remembering Eva's former experience in that very shack, which was too idiotic for words, he decided. Here was a tumbledown pigsty on the edge of a wood, and because one cad had murdered another and hidden him and then hung himself on one of the beams of that pigsty, therefore any one else who happened to come into the said pigsty were bound to be bothered with qualms. Well, he didn't know what had hit him just now, but something had. For instance, he seemed to see a place not unlike the one he was in now, and there were all sorts of weird happenings about it which were quite indefinite. Yet the place seemed to bring back some of his old memories. "Oh blazes!" he growled to himself, "I'd better get out of this. I'm certainly not drunk and I'm equally not dreaming. I'd better get home."

He went out. The fresh, clear, moist scent of the winter woods was soothing to him; he didn't

know why it was more soothing to him than usual, but somehow it was.

He passed the head of the mere and wished he had brought a gun. The wild duck were flighting overhead in a most tantalizing way, in a way they hardly ever did when he had a gun, but that is the way with the creatures of the wild. He got back to the house. He looked at the hall table. There were more letters, more or less a nuisance the lot of them, but—none in Eva's hard bold handwriting. That disgusted him. She hadn't written to him since his return. Why not?

CHAPTER XIV

DEPRESSION

MALPAS ENSCOMBE was a very disgusted man. He thought he was a very ill-used man—ill-used by fortune—or the want of it—and ill-used by everything and everybody else besides. Perhaps he was; some of us are.

He had a stock run of about 10,000 *morgen*—i.e., about double that number of acres. But at least half of it was almost useless, being abrupt slopes grown with spekboem and topped with tumbled piles of rock, a paradise for *daasjes*—the coney of Scripture—and baboons. But then, Malpas Enscombe didn't want to farm *daasjes* and baboons.

The last two seasons had been bad—very bad—and Enscombe's bankers were beginning to get unpleasant about his overdraft. The side of his farm which didn't consist of spekboem and other thick bush, was goodly enough. His large ostrich camp stretching down to the bank of the Kunaga River held good grass and succulent herbage grateful to the palate of the lordly bird, and fronted to the sun.

He had constructed a good dam or two, overhung by the usual willow, and when rain fell these were well filled. On the whole, with regard to his farm in good seasons he had no very great reason to feel disgusted. Yet now he was, for there had been two bad ones.

He had a wife, whom he didn't much like; incidentally she didn't much like him—not an uncommon complaint. He had a daughter, in her early teens, then away at a first-class diocesan school, and he didn't like her being away for the best part of the year; but that couldn't be helped, he supposed. Still, he reflected, what was the good of progeny if you had to dispense with it just at the age when it was most useful—and cheering? And now that bother about the overdraft was pressing him sorely. What the devil was he going to do about it? he kept thinking.

There is nothing like money care to eat into and canker any man's heart—more especially when his hat doesn't cover his sole liability. This one felt it all as he went out into the radiant dazzle of the sunshine. The veldt was simply brown—no sign of green anywhere, except the dark foliage of the *bontebosch klompjies* dotted about the camp, or the spongy-leafed spekboem. The dams were simply expanses of dry criss-crossed cracked earth, and still the skies were as brass. And the bank was pressing for its overdraft. Enscombe had good reason for feeling disgusted.

"*I* don't know what the devil we're coming to," he growled to himself as he crammed half a handful of Magaliesberg, loose in his pocket, into his pipe. "I'll have to go bust. And then?"

He didn't seem to care for himself, but he thought of his daughter; away at that diocesan school—which wasn't a cheap one, either—no, not by any means. Bar that consideration, why he could betake himself up country and try his luck there. Then, by way of doing tender helpmeet in his then mood, his wife hailed him from the doorway.

"Malpas, I wish you'd go and give old Sanna a talking to. She's as cheeky as she can be. I can't do anything with her."

"No, I shan't," he called back over his shoulder. "Women are your department."

He soon found something in his own, for at that moment a boy came up hot foot to tell him that a cow had got stuck in a quicksand down in the Kunaga River, and all their efforts to get her out had proved unavailing. In a second Enscombe's instinct was aroused, and he forgot all about the weighing down overdraft and a tiresome female partner.

The willow-fringed banks of the river stood perpendicular, high above the river bed. Below were two Kafirs and one Hottentot, pulling idiotically on a *reim* looped round the horns of a cow embedded—fast embedded—to the dewlap in one of those nasty red quicksands, which occur from time to time in those silly rivers, which latter are either mere

trickle or running fifty feet deep between high banks. Enscombe climbed down the cliff-like sand bank and cursed hideously as he reached the river shore beneath.

"*Jou verdomde eselkopen,*" he cried, very angrily. "Why didn't you cut some thorn *takken* and you'd get it out in a minute. *Magtig!* but you've lost me another cow."

He was bothered about that overdraft, and a cow was a cow.

"Go and cut some," he went on, stamping with rage, talking in the Boer *taal.* "Go—don't you hear, and be damned to you all!"

Then it transpired that they hadn't a hatchet among them. These three idiots had come along to dig out a bebogged beast with nothing more instrumental than a *reim*—and curses. Enscombe was beside himself. Again he thought of the overdraft, and—a cow was a cow. His language was absolutely unprintable.

"Here, Cobus, Jantje, Gafula! I'll murder the salted lot of you in a minute," was the mildest part of it he got out. "Go and *pull up* some small *takken*, you fools, as you haven't got anything to chop them with."

Malpas Enscombe was an extra strong man, and very handy—and ready—with his fists; so the trio managed somehow to get some branches by sheer tearing them off. The while, the owner of the cow was holding on to the *reim* for all he was

worth—incidentally for all she was worth, for cattle ran to a good price in times of drought.

The branches were placed so as to form a foothold for the bogged animal, then to the accompaniment of a great deal of language and energetic encouragement on the part of all four, it finally found footing on the artificial platform just laid down, and none too soon either. Then Enscombe gave the final haul, and the beast staggered out of the slough, stared wildly around, uttered that nasty growling sound which cattle emit when they feel nasty, then charged Enscombe straight on end.

This was human nature, beautifully exemplified in the beast, especially the female beast. Enscombe had got this one out of a hole, in fact saved her life, wherefore she tried to take his. However, he was experienced enough to know that such would happen, so found no great difficulty in dodging the onslaught.

Then it charged the Kafir, Gafula, who promptly tried to climb the cliff-like bank; in fact, shot up it with monkey-like agility, and managed to get one hand round some kind of stem growing on top. This gave way, and down he came with a crash, and the scared and frantic cow, not knowing what to do next, looked at him with an expression of utter disgust, and strolled off leisurely down the river bed. Her owner looked after her.

"Well, there's eight or ten pound saved at any rate," he said. "Now then, all of you, go and collect some more cattle, and bring them to the *draai* there

below. When this one sees them, she'll come up. *Hamba—ke. Hartloep*," mixing his languages, as the way is in those latitudes.

Enscombe sat on a stone and pulled out his pipe. As he lighted it—for the pipe of a man most times out of doors is seldom less than half filled—his mind came round to the source of his bothers, lack of the needful to wit. The emancipated cow was walking restlessly up and down the stones, but with no further inclination to charge anything or anybody, and of her he took no notice. He was thinking of more than one promissory note now maturing, and how the devil he was going to meet it. And the river meandered slowly on, red and shallow, in mighty contrast to when it should be roaring along, about thirty or forty feet above his head—if he were still there—carrying with it tree trunks and drowned animals, what time the rains further up country had availed to swell it.

A gang of monkeys sprang out from the bank a hundred yards below him. He wished, mechanically, that he had a rifle so that he could decimate some of the mischievous little brutes in mid-air as they skipped, gracefully, from one sand-bank to another; an uncommonly sporting type of shot by the way. Then he heard the grating cackle of a troop of guinea-fowl coming back to the river, and thought how a brace of them would come in handy for the pot; but he had no shot-gun. Then again he thought of those promissory notes, and a peevish, discon-

tented wife ready with some complaint to console him with on his return, and almost wished he had any sort of firearm, but not for wild game. He felt fairly sick of it all.

But he hadn't got it, consequently he got up, and took his way back to the house. The boys would carry out his instructions and bring back sufficient cattle to get out the erring cow. In the doorway his wife met him.

"Here's a letter from your cousin, Philip Averno," she said, holding one out. She was one of those people who invariably describe the author of one's correspondence from the outside of the envelope.

He took it. He was feeling very disgusted with things in general as we have said, and in a correspondingly bad humour. That state of circumstance is apt to make a man that way.

"Well? Aren't you going to open it?" said his legal partner.

"Oh yes. Some time. There's no hurry." And he put it into his pocket.

Then she was disgusted. The post didn't come in every day—in fact twice a week; a blessed state of things which is fast becoming scarce even in those parts. She was bursting to know what was in that letter, but Enscombe was not going to satisfy her. We have said that they did not particularly like each other. As it happened he sat down to dinner and forgot all about that particular letter. Later on, in the course of the afternoon, he remembered it;

and sitting outside, under the shade of a tree, while his horse was panting under its saddle laden with a few birds hanging from the D's thereof, and a small buck which he had shot, strapped on behind, it occurred to him to investigate the contents.

They suggested an idea; the very salvation of an idea, it seemed. Philip Averno and he were first cousins on the "distaff" side, and had always been on the most jolly and friendly of terms. He had spent a most delightful and ever-to-be-remembered time at Beverstoft, during a visit he had made to England a few years back. They had shot together, had yarned in the smoke-room together; and, as Enscombe had said on parting, he had had the time of his life. They had corresponded at intervals since; in short, the two men had taken a liking to each other; as men will, for no earthly reason except that they are fellow sportsmen and have ideas in common. This letter was an absolutely jolly and breezy letter; bringing back old days of healthy, breezy sport; old nights of jolly, snug evenings in the smoke-room talking over the day's doings—and other things, and Enscombe's heart warmed as he read it under the shade of the flat mimosa tree. Now, Philip Averno was well off; quite well off; and Enscombe wondered whether the loan of a few hundred pounds, or, say a thousand, to tide him over his difficulties, would be of any use asking for.

He hated that sort of thing. He had muddled

through life somehow, and had never borrowed a shilling from anybody. But now he was down to "bed rock," and it was a case of being sold up, or—God knew what. And his daughter, at the—not cheap—diocesan school!

He looked at the letter again, read it through. Yes, it was all right. It rang square. It brought back Beverstoft, and the old time, when he had thrown black care to the winds, for the time. He thought that the idea might work, yet he hated it. Asking anybody for anything! But in all probability a few hundreds to Averno might mean little or nothing to him. To Malpas Enscombe it meant a very real and ghastly lot.

As he got up it seemed that things looked brighter—were clearing. Some instinct seemed to tell him that his kinsman would not fail him at a stretch. From his side it was not as though he were asking for a *gift*. He was as certain that he would be in a position to repay the loan—given time—as that the sun would rise to-morrow. There had been two bad seasons; there could not possibly be a third; it was against all tradition. The bank charged high interest, and furthermore was pressing for payment over and above that.

Here was a salvation clause. But even between the short distance over the veldt, where the cock koorhaans were crowing, or rising to the accompaniment of their own uproarious shoutings, again his spirits went down. What did he care? He was

sick of it all—life and its adversities—dead sick of it. What had it ever brought to him? Nothing. For two pins he would have put his Webley against his forehead, but—he thought of his daughter at the—not cheap—diocesan school.

"Well?" said his wife peevishly. "Has it occurred to you to read your cousin's letter?"

"I don't know. I believe it has, now you mention it. What then?"

She looked the impersonation of unmitigated disgust. She was prickling with curiosity to know what that said missive contained. Enscombe knew that, but she got on his nerves like the devil, and he was a nervy man, albeit a South African stock farmer. So he went on—

"Oh, it was jolly enough. By the way he said something about coming out here to look us up for a bit. How's that?"

"That" made the other brisk up.

"But what on earth should we do with him here?"

"Do with him? Give him plenty to shoot, of course. You don't suppose Averno wants a lot of herding and valeting and all that. He'd be as jolly as a bug in a rug."

"Oh, very well. He's your relative, so do as you like. I don't care."

Enscombe came to the conclusion that her answer, for once, was a wise one. He hadn't shown her his kinsman's letter, but its tone seemed to lift from

him, himself, overweighting clouds. He hoped Averno would come out and pay them a visit. In fact that was an event he would very much look forward to, apart from considerations.

CHAPTER XV

ELATION

ENSCOMBE'S relief was caused by the conclusion of the letter, which after a good deal of news about Beverstoft, sport of the past season and so on, ran thus:—

"I'm getting very fed up with things here, and am thinking seriously of coming and invading you. I'd like to have another romp over your *veldt*, and knock down a few more koorhaan and guinea-fowl out of that old close-shooting gun of mine at eighty yards, as usual in old times. How are you getting on? You said that times were bad; and two years' drought, I know what that means, it means bother to the man who's got the drought. I have a drought sometimes, but it isn't the same sort of drought I'm talking about as regards you. Well, look here, old man, I expect, from what you told me when you last wrote, you are getting a bit on 'bedrock'; if so, say so. You can rely upon it you need never be on 'bedrock' within reason, if I can help it. If you are now, the tune of a thousand might ring right, but I'm

afraid that means about the limit, so say yes or no, and I apologise for insulting you, if I have; if not, cheer oh! I'm drinking your health. Send me a cable if yes.

"Your old sporting pal,
"PHILIP AVERNO."

"P.S. I hope that cursed old cock ostrich of yours that held me up on a stinkwood post for an hour and a half has broken his leg long since, without loss to you, but gain in the shape of damages from some devil of a Venter or De la Rey who is sneaking a buck on the outskirts of your territory. Well ta-ta, old sport, and apologising again if necessary. Mind you cable me all right."

Enscombe read this letter again, and he decided that somehow or other his difficulties had gone into the clouds. It was a curious thing, he thought, just as he was tearing himself to pieces over a worry, a solution of that worry should drop, Heaven-sent, from the clouds. He did not know what to make of it, it seemed rather too good. Here was an accident, etymologically a "happening." The cloud over him had cleared. He had spent sleepless nights, or nearly sleepless nights, and hideous days which had taken ten years off his life, he estimated in his nasty cynical moments; and now, all he had to do was to accept his relative's very unusual offer. But even then he hesitated. He had always been of

an absolutely independent temperament. He hated the very name of the word "obligation," yet now he was contemplating putting himself under an obligation. Still, Philip Averno was a first-class sportsman, and they knew each other well, and had liked each other well; as men will do when they take to each other; so why should he refuse this offer? He was on "bedrock," and here was an opportunity for getting off it, why then bother about obligations? If the positions had been reversed, he would have done all that for the other, so why should he stand on punctilio for letting the other do all that for him? It was absurd, he wouldn't. He thought of his farm which by an angelic inspiration perhaps he hadn't got any mortgages on. He thought of that beastly bank, which was pressing him about his heavy overdraft—incidentally its manager and he were rather friendly in private; whenever he went in to Gydisdorp they used to meet at the small local club, and have drinks together. He thought of his wife and felt disgusted—he generally did when he thought of her at all, because she was one of those people who invariably annoyed him on whatever subject was under discussion. He thought of his daughter at the—not cheap—diocesan school, and that decided him. Damn obligations! Philip Averno was not the man to bother about obligation, and certainly if there was a man on the face of the globe to whom it did not matter to be under an obligation to, that man was Philip Averno.

But what about Marian? If Averno came out, would she make herself agreeable to him, or the reverse? Marian had a way of not making herself agreeable to stray visitors; in fact she disliked them, and never lost an opportunity of letting them know she did. Now Enscombe didn't want to take her into immediate confidence with regard to any proffered assistance coming from Averno.

When he got into the house and sat down to table he was grimly and gleefully sniggering to himself. He knew Marian was prickly, on tenterhooks with regard to what the communication from his relative had contained, and he was not going to tell her—in a hurry. She might wait, she often kept him waiting. She glowered in due course.

"Well," she said, "what is there so mysterious about that letter?"

"Mysterious?" shortly. "Why heaps."

"H'm," she answered, beginning to drum her heels on the ground, as the way is with the angered female. "I can't make it out. You get a letter and you are making a mystery of it."

"Well, it's a letter from a male, as you yourself observed when you handed it to me, so what's the matter with the mystery?" She said nothing, she only sniffed. Enscombe went on placidly with his goat chops and pumpkin and rice; be it remembered we said it was a bad season, a very bad season. "Suppose, for instance, that very letter you are making such a hullabaloo about, incidentally not

from a feminine, should spell a message of salvation."

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"Oh, never mind, I know what I am."

"But what do you mean by message of salvation?"

"Oh, nothing; except that I know my own business better than you do."

There wasn't much harmony at that supper table. Enscombe was lost in thinking. It was as if God Almighty had come down from heaven to help him. He was raised from the depths of gloom to the empyrean. He saw now sunshine where before he brooded in cloud. He loved his farm and its work and all to do with it. For a couple of years past he had brooded on the idea of losing it and all that it meant; now he saw skylight again, and yet this woman, with her set, mahogany face—incidentally not a bad-looking one—and foolish ways of taking him, somehow or other was the last person on earth he would have had the slightest inclination to draw to his sympathy whether in good or in ill—in this case it was in good, and he had no such inclination; if it had been in ill he would have had still less; so they sat opposite each other and said nothing. Yet he was thinking hard and deeply. His relative's letter seemed to have pulled him out of the Slough of Despond, and still the last thing he thought of was to communicate the good news to her. Why? Well, it doesn't matter why, but

——Why? is a very large spoke in the wheels of the human progress car.

She sat and still said nothing. He sat and still, said nothing—more. It was as they usually sat. Outside the *veldt* lay under the sheen of the sunshine, with its shimmering of heat rising up from the ground. The fall of dark bush from behind the house was visible from the window, its abrupt scarp falling halfway framed in the window, in relief to the softer roll of the *veldt* on the level. The big cock ostrich—not the one Averno had referred to—strutting in the camp below, boomed his treble note, there was a yelping shout from a brace of koorhaan rising from the grass a hundred yards from the door, kicking up a row for no earthly reason whatever, as is their wont.

Enscombe looked at it all, and thought what a jolly good thing it would be if Averno did come out. Life was monotonous at times, with an utterly discontented and uncompanionable wife, and a daughter whom he only saw intermittently for a few weeks in the year; and who as it happened he had a weakness for seeing a great deal oftener. The former struck in—

"Well, Malpas? When are we going to hear something about that letter of yours, that's going to work out our salvation?"

Enscombe finished his glass of very excellent *dop*, then mixed another. The tank water was cold and

clear—soon it would be neither if the drought continued. Then feeling more placid—

"What would you think if the soul of all our difficulties was saved? and I think it is."

"Oh, is it?" she said. "What sort of miracle is that?"

"Miracle! Why, miracle spells that we are at the end of our bother, and that spells Averno. How's that?"

She stared at him.

"He wants to come out here," went on Enscombe, "and put in a shoot. Are you going to be civil to him or not?"

"Or not? What do you mean? Aren't I civil to everybody?"

"I should think you weren't. There was Jack Harford and Tom Moseley, whom I got over last month to have a whack at the guinea-fowl, for the outside of two days, and you looked at them all the time as if you wished them both dead."

"That's not true," she retorted, "I did nothing of the sort."

"Oh yes, you did," rather good-humouredly. "Well, you'd better drop that tack if this one comes over here. You mustn't go on that at all; for one thing he's a very great sporting pal of mine, for another thing he's volunteering to be the means of getting me out of my difficulties. Now then, there's an experience, mind—*volunteering* to. He seemed to know by instinct that I was in

difficulties, I don't know why—telepathy perhaps, or whatever they call it; and now just as I was thinking of jumping into the Kunaga river, and burying myself in the quicksands that I just lugged the cow out of, because I was so dead sick of life—and, incidentally, of you—comes this volunteering offer from Averno. What-oh, for providential?"

His consort looked at him queerly. Her first instinct was to resent the "you," but she had just sufficient gumption to realize that he was talking good-humouredly.

She answered: "Of course I will do all I can for your relative if he comes, and make him as comfortable as I can and all that. As for those other two you've mentioned—well, you know I never did like them. They are both a pair of wasters. And I can't pretend to like people I don't like. And now what has this relative of yours undertaken to do in the way of helping us out of this hobble?"

"Do?" said Enscombe. "Why, he's volunteering me the loan of a thousand pounds. That'll do it, won't it? Violet's school bills are two terms in arrear and they are worrying me for settlement, so is the infernal bank. So there you are."

Her face cleared.

"Well, that is rather out of the way," she said. "Well, if he comes, I'll do my best."

"Right-oh," said Enscombe. Then he said, "Blazes!"

This ejaculatory prayer was apparently incon-

sequent. Its occasion was the appearance of a Kafir in front of the window—a strange Kafir.

Enscombe did not want to be disturbed just then. He was feeling quite comfortable in the coolness of his house, in contrast to the shimmering heat outside. There was something in the appearance of the fellow as he saw him outside that made as if he had come to bother him.

He was panting and his eyes were distended. Enscombe held the thankless and unremunerative office of Field Cornet—he didn't know why he held it, but it had been pressed on him, and he had been fool enough to allow himself to be pressed. Such an incursion as this pointed at first blush to a murder or a minor skull-cracking, which in his official capacity he would be obliged to go and investigate. It might be two miles or twenty away. That he didn't in the very least want.

The Kafir stood rolling his eyes and looking first at the door and then at the window. Enscombe, with a heave of discontent, got up, reached down a big bag of Magaliesberg, crammed his pipe, lighted it and went out.

"Well, what do you want?"

The Kafir, who was a miserable, civilized specimen of his race, in a waistcoat and grimy shirt-sleeves and a battered hat, saluted.

"*'Nkose!*" he said. "There's a man been found dead up there," with a jerk of the head in a certain direction.

Enscombe gave a stamp of disgust. "There's always a man found dead," he said to himself, not to the Kafir, "up there. I'm sick of that cursed place, I don't know why I haven't burnt it down long ago."

Which was an echo exactly of what we heard Philip Averno say to Eva Passinghame with regard to the tarred shed.

"Well, what's the matter with the man? Is he a white man?"

"*Ewa 'Nkose.*"

"Oh, Lord! Oh, Lord!" said Enscombe wearily, "that's the third *dronklap*[1] white man that's come to grief in that infernal place within the last year. I shall positively have to get some ecclesiastical party to exorcise it. Curse the place."

"Curse—what place?" The voice proceeded from his consort who had come out, in time to hear his last ejaculatory prayer.

"Oh, that infernal house up at the kloof," he answered. "Why, only that here is another waster gone up and expired there."

She shrank back in horror.

"What?" she said. "Another of them? Malpas, you must have that horrid building pulled down. You really must."

"All right then. We'll get the 'elementals,' don't they call it, transferred here for want of other

[1] Drink-sodden or drunkard.

board and lodging," he answered sneeringly ; sneeringly because he did not in the least believe in any sort of mystery attaching to the building under discussion. But she did.

Concerning which building—more, directly.

CHAPTER XVI

DISAGREEMENT

WE have said Averno was a gusty-minded man; wherefore it is not inconsequent that he should have changed his mind and have elected to rush down to Comptonswick vicarage the next morning. And this he did. A policeman held up his car midway and took his name and address. But at this he only cursed, then laughed and thought no more about it. But when after racing through a county and a half he had got to the vicarage he found no one in, and this disgusted him.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon, a bright beautiful afternoon which threw out the stucco surroundings more than ever, and it occurred to him that she might have been there to meet him. But she was not.

"This is a holy beginning for an engagement!" he said to himself bitterly. "If I am of no account now, what will I be later on?"

The servant said that Miss Eva had gone to play

tennis somewhere and she did not know when she would be back. She thought Miss Hermione had gone too. Dr. Passinghame was out, but might be in any minute, but wouldn't Mr. Averno wait? She was a good-looking girl and fully up to the romance of the situation; and like all of her sex devoutly enjoyed it. Yes, Averno would wait.

"Now look here, Florence," he said, in his gusty way. "When will Miss Eva be in? Have you any idea?"

"Well, sir," answered the girl, smiling, "I should think it wouldn't be long. Won't you sit down and wait? Is there anything I can get you?"

"No, no thanks, Florence. Yes, I'll sit down and wait. That'll be all right."

She went out. He subsided into a chair in the vicar's study, into which he had been shown, and felt more and more disgusted. What was the matter? He had sent her a wire announcing his coming and she wasn't there. She had gone off to play an idiotic game instead. The circumstance paralleling up with the fact that he had heard no word from her, threw him out of tune. And a faint black spot began to corrode in his mind. "Some one else," perhaps, was the first suggestion that occurred to him. If she could not keep off one silly game on his account—why what——? He hadn't had a line from her and had rushed over a county and a half to come and see why; and yet here he was

left to kick up his heels waiting. He didn't like that; what male ever does?

We suspect that a very large percentage of the breaking-off of understandings between the opposite sexes is due to those very words, "being kept waiting." The average normal and healthy male simply loathes the process, wherefore as he values his future happiness—or possibly the reverse—he ought never to go shopping, for instance, with his feminine and future counterpart; we give shopping as a mere instance. Now Averno having as aforesaid rushed through a county and a half, and having been held up by a policeman, with a prospective fine of ten pounds or so—had arrived here with a definite object, and found himself waiting for an indefinite time for that same object. Consequently it is small wonder that he felt irritated, which is the worst possible frame of mind for meeting any one in whom you feel interested, potentially for life.

He grew more and more tired of it. His big car stood outside, to the intense admiration of stucco-dom, standing in windows and doors. He watched the clock. An hour had run by, then an hour and a quarter. He came to the conclusion he wasn't going to wait any longer. Still—he waited longer. Then suddenly he heard the front gate open and fresh feminine voices.

"Why, Mr. Averno, we never expected you as early as this," cried Hermione.

"Oh, didn't you?" he said in his gusty way. "But that's why I sent the wire."

Hermione, the placid, smiled up at him—in a soothing way. But here came in a jarring note. Eva had not come in to meet him. She seemed to be fooling about something or other in the hall by the sound of it; and the note was not a pleasant one. Why hadn't she been the first to welcome him? he thought.

Now she did come in, and her welcome of him was not such as he had started on his long run, with its concomitant incidents and disadvantages to find. This was just one of those situations wherein people seem to tangle themselves up.

Averno, like most hasty-minded men, was touchy, and now he felt very touchy indeed, all things considered. Eva had shown no manifest hurry to come and meet him. She had hung back in the hall, whereas Hermione the placid, and equally pretty in her own line of colouring, had been the first to greet him.

"I hope you haven't been waiting very long," said Eva.

"Oh no; nothing to mention," he said. "Only an hour and twenty minutes. Didn't you get my wire?"

"Yes, we got it, but I had to go and see a tennis match."

He didn't say anything to this—at first. Then—

"Well, I don't know. After my wire I should

think you'd have spoofed the tennis match," said Averno characteristically.

Eva could be gusty too. Now it came out.

"I don't see why," she said in a hard fashion. "An arrangement *is* an arrangement." She was breathing hardly, quickly.

The other didn't feel placid himself.

"Lord! Lord!" he was thinking. "Such are the ways of women. What *are* you to do with them? The best line in the world is to leave them alone, they are all more or less disquieting to say the least of it." And this one with whom he had set up an engagement had started in—early—to be about as disquieting as she could be.

He looked at her; pleasing, quiet-eyed, utterly alluring; yet—utterly useless to him, on her own showing. He said nothing, but he thought, and his thoughts ran to contrast, as thoughts of the minority who are not fools are wont to do. The contrast now in his mind took the form of one between Hermione and Eva. The former was soothing, the latter the reverse. The former, coming into the room, had begun by smoothing him down the right way; the latter had begun by emphatically brushing him up the wrong way. Now she went on—

"You seem a bit put out. What's the matter?"

When a person is put out there is nothing warranted to put them out still more than to emphasize that they are so. Consequently Averno did not

feel soothed. He was sore and disgusted that Eva should have treated him in this fashion when he had raced over a county and a half on purpose to see her, and had sent a wire to announce the fact, and he was not the man to feel meek under that sort of treatment. He sat silent, yet there was nothing of the sulky about his demeanour. That wasn't him, it would have been too undignified, and Averno never by any chance lacked in self-respect whatever his feelings. Hermione began to look a little uneasy. She did not know what to do to relieve the tension. If only their father would come in, she thought, it might save the situation ; but he didn't come in, Then Averno got up.

" Well, I'm off," he said. " Good-bye." He shook hands with both of the girls. Eva was stiff, but Hermione was anxious, and looked it.

" Tell the Doctor I'm sorry I can't wait to see him " ; then in a minute the buzzing of his big car in front of the door announced his start. Hermione looked at Eva and shook her head.

" You've done it now," she said.

" Done what ? " snapped the other.

" Why, you've let your silly temper get the better of you, as usual. I suppose you are fond of the man or you wouldn't have got engaged to him, and now you've thrown him off."

" Thrown him off ? No, I haven't," retorted Eva petulantly.

" But you jolly well have," answered Hermione

the Girtonite and non-Suffragette. "He isn't going to come back after the silly way you've taken him just now. Why, it's perfectly idiotic. If you are really fond of the man and intend to marry him you've simply brushed him up all the wrong way, and men don't like being brushed up the wrong way, or any part of the wrong way. In fact they perfectly hate it."

"I'm not going to sit under the foot of any mere man," retorted Eva the non-Girtonite and the Suffragette. "So there you are." The other looked at her again and said nothing. She thought her sister was acting like a fool. But she said no more; instead she went out of the room and busied herself with some housework.

Averno, racing home in his car, was in a whirl of rage, but—no touch of compunction. "'I love them that love me,' and they that go to play tennis when I wired them I am coming I have no use for," he said to himself. When he got home the whole thing seemed changed. The girl with whom he had walked about his place and bicycled around the beautiful countryside, seemed to have gone clean out of his existence. His was a nature which couldn't stand a check of this sort, and now he had got one. It was an experience, and one which he was not taking on in the least.

When he got home, very late at night, sitting in his "den," for it was too late for bothering about

a formal dinner, his thoughts of his former companion associated with his surroundings were now not those of reminiscent affection, but of repulsion —of absolute repulsion. He had a singular aversion to temper in the other sex. He looked upon an entity of the other sex under that condition with almost as much repulsion as he would have looked upon her drunk. Eva had shown that and it had disgusted him—utterly disgusted him—and the recollection of it had clean knocked out the happy associations of the time that they had spent here together. Now, he thought, what was this going to lead to? Any one who had treated him as Eva had would be no use. He was nothing if not downright, and he couldn't possibly stand one of the other sex with a temper. It was loathsome to him. From the moment she had shown it on no provocation she had become unimportant to him, utterly unimportant; the recollection of her even associated with the surroundings seemed to be dead; dead and buried. Yet he was bound fast to her by a tie of honour. What should he do? There was no question of monetary compensations between people who were social equals, unlike the common herd who sought compensation for "broken hearts" in a court of law. Yet he felt he could not take on a lifelong partner who had begun in this way.

It is a curious thing that Averno should so suddenly have been disillusioned over a mere matter of temper, but there you are. And yet—"a mere matter of

temper" leads to nine-tenths of the world's tragedies; not drink, as the preachers of all sorts and sizes are ever eager to assert.

The more he thought of it the harder and more bitter his mind grew. If there was one thing he disliked, apart from feminine temper, it was want of consideration. It happened that Averno with all his shortcomings—hastiness, inconsequence and what not—possessed the redeeming feature of consideration for other people, except when he was driving a motor car. He was exceedingly popular with his few tenants and the inhabitants of Amory Furzeham generally, on this very account, and this is just the very want of consideration that Eva had shown towards him, not only that, but had resented him resenting it. In short she had turned on a totally different character to that which he had sized up of her, while she had been here alone with him. Here in this house alone with him. That wasn't workable. To tell the truth the man was in a whirl of rage, he was even more than disgusted. It was a curious thing how this one defection had altogether demolished a sort of an ideal, but it had.

Then his thoughts went back to phases of his old life. He thought it might not be a bad plan to look up some of them again. He felt very lonely and very resentful.

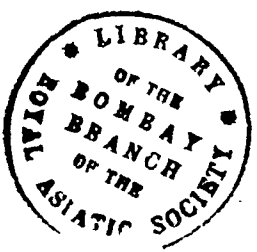
* * * * *

Several days went by and Averno felt very lonely and resentful still. Not a word from Eva or from

any one to do with her. Not even from the vicar, that jolly, genial sportsman.

"Oh, well, well, well!" he thought. "What's the good of bothering about other people. No one cares a tinker's twopenny curse for any one in this world unless you are 'big' enough, except from motives of self-interest. I'm not 'big' enough, therefore no one is self-interested in me."

Which is precisely the point whereat Averno's self-invite—and other invite—to come out and visit Enscombe and his stock farm came in.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CHAPTER XVII

DISCUSSION

"I THINK you've got a bit short of late, Eva my child," said Hermione one morning. "Let's go and see the meet of the Ashdown and Badsley at the old *Figtree*. We can wheel over there in forty minutes easily."

"Oh, all right," said Eva, rather crustily. "I don't care what I do."

Hermione looked at her and said nothing, and did nothing; as to the latter she came near shaking her head but did not, for Hermione was that *rara avis*, a tactful feminine.

In her own mind she thought Eva a fool, in a kindly not unaffectionate sort of way. She had brushed this man up all the wrong way. Why? Well, she, too, had gustiness. Hermione shook her head. Here were two gusty people she thought, both attached to each other; curiously enough, by a perfectly accidental draw, both gusty. Now how on earth would these two people manage to hit it off for life?

Dr. Passinghame came in.

"Well, you two girls," he said jollily, bluffly. "What are you talking about?"

"Look here, old father," said Hermione, "I've told you again and again that I won't have you in this drawing-room with that 'thinking cap' of yours on. If you want to wear it keep it for the study." This, as we have said before, was in allusion to the vicar's biretta, which he was fond of wearing on all and every occasion, as he would say mainly for the reason that the miller wore a white cap, i.e. 'to keep his head warm.' "What we were talking about and thinking about is a matter that doesn't bear male discussion," she went on, with her placid and withal sunny laugh. "Doesn't matter."

"Oh, doesn't it?" said Dr. Passinghame. "But I can jolly well guess what it was."

Thereupon Eva inconsequently cleared out—the early Victorian writer would have said flounced out—of the room. The vicar "unclerically" whistled as he subsided into an armchair.

"I say, Hermione," he said. "What's the row?"

"Row, dear?" with a laugh in her soft blue eyes. "Why, what are you getting at?"

"Ha, ha," laughed her father drily, "you know as well as I do. Now—why has Eva chucked him?"

Hermione the tactful didn't quite know what

to answer. She was far more in sympathy with her father and in his confidence than her sister was, and yet, curiously enough, there had never been any jealousy set up on that account between the two girls. She answered—

"Look here, old father dear, you must leave *us* of the opposite sex to work out our own salvation in fear and trembling—often trembling, but not always. Eva is old enough and pretty enough to take care of herself, so there is no necessity to worry about her. I'm one but possibly not the other. So—there you are."

The vicar looked down at the upturned smiling face and thought. Thought how that very smiling face had gladdened his years in his old age. Thought how the other had rushed off into Suffragism and Socialism and all the rest of it—incidentally with no thought of *him*. Being a man with a proportionately ordered mind, he could not help drawing comparisons. This girl's face he took in his hands and kissed.

"My darling child," he said. "What a comfort you have been to me, and are. God bless you for it." Then he went out of the room.

Eva came in, rather stormily.

"Haven't my *Votes* come?" she said.

"Ungrammatical, dear," said Hermione, the Girton graduate. "You should have said, 'Hasn't my *Votes* come?' seeing it is the title of a paper."

"Well, we won't split hairs over that," answered Eva.

"All right then. In that case, I don't mind telling you it hasn't."

Eva frowned, and began to walk up and down the room.

Hermione looked at her furtively and shook her head—when Eva wasn't looking. Her sister's demeanour had been a puzzle to her ever since her difference with Averno, and where the puzzle came was that Eva did not seem to care about that difference; if it had been herself for instance in Eva's place, she was sure she would have cared very much indeed, only in that case she was sure that the difference would never have arisen. She herself had taken a great liking to Averno, possibly because his character was totally different to her own, which all experience shows makes for harmony, whereas that of her sister and the other were too much alike, both hasty, impetuous. She wondered how she could put matters right between them. She would willingly have done so could she have seen her way, and yet—she was fully convinced in her own mind that it would not be for the good of these two to enter into a lifelong partnership. Then she decided that she was no judge on that point really. However she would make one attempt.

"Look here, Eva," she said, "I don't want to interfere in anybody's business, not even yours, but—don't you think you were a bit hasty with Mr. Averno the other day?"

Eva wheeled round in her walk up and down the room. She said—

"Why I was being taken to task by a man."

"To whom you were engaged," supplied Hermione gently. "And who would naturally expect a little consideration on that very score, yet you rather treated him as if he were some ordinary tame dog sitting up on his hind legs and wagging his tail for biscuits."

"Well, that's just what he ought to be," flared out Eva in a storm of rage; "I'm not going to be at any man's beck and call, now or at any other time."

The Girtonite, but non-Suffragette, shook her head again. In her heart of hearts, looking at her sister in her then attitude, although her own sister, she thought that Averno had had rather a lucky escape. Still on pacific intent, she resumed—

"Now look here, dear, what can we do in this? It is absurd to make a break off over a tinpot tiff of this kind. Supposing we send father over to Beverstoft for another shoot, that'll bring matters right again, I'll bet."

Eva's face simply blazed.

"What?" she said with a kind of hiss. "Go begging to any man, for that's what it amounts to. Oh no, no—not for this child."

Then Hermione gave it up, realizing it was hopeless. Or would time avail to heal this absurd quarrel, as she put it?

Then Aunt Caroline came in.

"Here are *Votes* just come, Eva," she said, and then the two fell to discussing all sorts of matters connected with The Cause.

Hermione left them and went across to her father's study. She found him smoking a pipe in front of the fire. The room looked as snug and cosy as we have seen it before.

"All right, old father, you can keep on your 'thinking cap' here," she said, drawing a chair to his side. "I've just been talking to Eva about this ridiculous split off; now couldn't you do something towards patching it up?"

"Do? What on earth can I do? You young people nowadays wax mighty testy if even their own father attempts to interfere in what you call 'your affairs.' *Interim* would you kindly state what you suggest I should do in this direction?" His tone was rather dry, his expression of countenance rather whimsical.

"Well, I thought," she ventured slowly, "you might write to Mr. Averno and suggest a day's shooting; he's given you an open invite, you know; and in the course of things that might result in putting the matter right."

Dr. Passinghame knocked the ashes out of his pipe into the fireplace. Then after a moment's pause he answered—

"No, no, Hermione, it can't be done. I like the man well enough; we are very good friends,

capital friends, and that on very short acquaintance indeed, but I'm not going begging to him. If Eva's been silly enough to sacrifice a very promising chance indeed to an outburst of temper, that's her look-out. I shan't dream of interfering. She seems unblissfully ignorant as to how to handle her man, and in my experience of life the said man is one who could very easily be handled with a certain amount of tact, but not with temper. Well, if she wants to patch it up with him she must do it herself, but—I fancy she'll find it rather difficult."

Hermione sighed.

"That's the worst of Eva's temper," she said, unconsciously echoing one of Averno's reflections, "and it does spoil people so, especially us women."

"Hear, hear," said the vicar drily, dropping his hand on that of the girl by his side. "Well, one of you hasn't inherited it at any rate, thank the Lord."

"Then you won't do what I suggest, old father?" taking advantage of his momentary softness.

"Sorry, but can't."

"And Eva won't," said Hermione.

This is how silence set in between the vicarage and Averno, to which hereinafter, allusion is made.

CHAPTER XVIII

DEAD MAN'S KLOOF

THE shadows of evening were closing darkly in upon the steep, bush-grown slopes of Dead Man's Kloof.

High above, these slopes culminated in rugged, overhanging cliffs of red ironstone, which in the still, uncertain twilight, assumed a brooding, lurid line as of blood. At the head of the ravine the abrupt broken face of the mountain rose in a grim barrier. This indescribably gloomy, and desolate ravine was a *cul-de-sac*.

It branched laterally out of a long winding poort or defile, hardly less wild and forbidding. Through this ran a waggon road. From one point on this road the roof of the old house was just visible—standing back in the kloof some four or five hundred yards.

Those who thus sighted it seldom cared to push their investigations further. On the contrary, they were apt to quicken their pace and widen the distance between themselves and the redoubted object

with all possible dispatch. Among those known thus to act were numbered—softly be it whispered—strong men of tried courage, whose cool bravery in the hour of peril, and when confronted with overwhelming odds, was a household word even beyond their own immediate circles. Yet, what on earth was there that was terrifying in so commonplace an object as an old thatched roof?

The house was of brick and plaster, and had, at most, consisted of but three rooms. It was just such a house as might be found upon the rougher kind of Boer stock-farms in the surrounding district. There were traces of old sheep-kraals behind it, now broken down and thickly overgrown with coarse and tangled herbage. About half the structure had fallen in, but the rest still defied the ravages of time and decay. It stood in a narrow open space in the dense bush, the very picture of forlorn desolation—the worm-eaten shutters closed, the door gaping wide open. No smoke arose from the chimney, no human voice woke its echoes; alone, it stood in its deathly solitude. The wild dog and the jackal bayed to the midnight moon beneath its very walls, and the loud, sonorous bark of the sentinel baboon reverberated in hoarse grumble among the glooming krantzes.

Those dwelling in the neighbourhood could not remember a time when the house in Dead Man's Kloof was inhabited. The mere circumstance of it being thus abandoned to decay and desolation

was sufficient in itself to cast an uncanny halo about the place. But, in point of fact, there was more. There were hints of an awful blood curse overhanging it—traditions of a terrible tragedy whereby the locality had gained its ill-omened name.

But these traditions were very old—old enough for the occurrence in which they had taken their rise, to be outside the memory of the oldest dweller in the neighbourhood. The last inhabitant of the place, in a fit of delirium tremens, or jealousy—report wavered as to which—had blown away the head of his young bride with his firelock, and then turning the weapon against himself had taken his own life. Tradition added, that the woman was strikingly beautiful. This, however, was improbable, and put in for purposes of colour.

There was a story that, formerly, owing to the efforts of a road inspector, an athletic and proportionately sceptical young Colonial, attempts had been made to accommodate the ruin to the use of the road parties engaged, from time to time, in repairing the waggon track to which we have alluded as running through the adjacent poort. But the natives composing these gangs, even though strangers hailing from a distance, soon got an inkling of the evil odour in which the place was held, and flatly refused with one consent to pass another night in it or anywhere near it, so the attempts were discontinued. Indeed, an occurrence which befell on the very last occasion of the place being so used,

was sufficient to settle the matter, once and for all.

The men, mostly Hottentots and half-castes, had been spending the evening in jollification, after their wont; joking, concertina playing and singing. Rations were on a liberal scale, and having thoroughly enjoyed themselves they lay down to sleep. Towards the small hours the whole gang was awakened by a series of the most frightful shrieks ever emitted from human throat. One of their number was in wild convulsions, while another lay so petrified with terror that he was perfectly speechless.

Fortunately there were bold spirits among them, who succeeded, in a measure, in allaying the panic-stricken tumult that ensued; and after a while the faculties of the least frightened of the pair being partially restored, this man solemnly stated that while lying accidentally awake he had been startled by seeing a figure approach the open door. The moon was shining brightly, and he made out the figure to be that of a woman—a white woman too, judging by the attire. He lay in a cold sweat of fear, powerless to move, watching it as it glided nearer and nearer. Within a couple of yards of the door it halted, the moon full upon it, and—God help him, he spoke every word of the truth—he saw standing there *a thing nearly without a head*—only a pair of red and bleeding jaws above the trunk, champing at him in the moonlight. This was enough. With wild yells of terror, the whole gang streamed forth

into the night, the only idea present in the mind of each frenzied panic-stricken wretch being to flee from the neighbourhood of the accursed dwelling as fast as his legs could carry him. In the morning the exasperated road inspector found his labourers scattered to the four winds of heaven, and an investigation of their quarters of the night before disclosed the presence of no one but a mouthing, jibbering idiot, on whom the light of reason was destined never again to dawn. Not until afterwards did the circumstances become fully known.

There were various Dutch farmers in the neighbourhood, on whom these events made a deep impression, for your Boer of the lower class—not all Boers are of the lower class, it may be mentioned, but these happened to be—is steeped to the ears in superstition. They came to the conclusion that whatever happened there was the work of the devil, very much so, and they shunned the place. Two or three of the English farmers, however, hard-headed, practical men, and not given to superstition at all, thought to investigate it. They armed themselves with a bottle of *dop* and some firearms, and went and spent a night there, that is, they spent part of a night; we say part, because it is a curious thing that, the bottle of *dop* notwithstanding, they seemed rather anxious to get up earlier than usual —a great deal earlier than usual—in fact before daylight. But they had *seen* nothing. Yet these were hard-headed, practical men, not given to super-

stition, and—they were each and all very eager to get home again.

Since the affair of the road party, the evil repute of the place had got abroad. It was discussed, on the stoep in summer, or round the fire in winter. Men would go and look at it in passing, but somehow or other, always in broad daylight. It is astonishing how superstition of the sort is ingrained in mankind, not only in the—so called—weaker sex, and here it came in. So the old, sordid, ruined homestead in Dead Man's Kloof was never now entered, not even by its owner, albeit he professed an utter scepticism as to any supernatural influences attaching to it, and its said owner was Malpas Enscombe.

CHAPTER XIX

ITUNZI YENTABA AND—VIOLET

"WELL, old chap," said Averno, at 6.30 a.m. "It's good to be out here again, and get the fresh whiff of the spekboem and mimosa, and the 'tang' of jolly air while still fresh the first thing in the morning. What are we going to shoot to-day? Springbuck or bushbuck, or a chance koodoo?"

"Well," said Enscombe in return, "I think the best chance would be the kloofs. The springbuck are beastly wild in the open, and I think a quiet drive at bushbuck down in one of the kloofs would be about the thing, not to mention a stray koodoo, if we find one."

"What about permits with regard to koodoo?" said Averno. "*And* the hundred pound fine—if you haven't got it?"

"Oh, damn the permit and the hundred pound fine," answered the other. "It's no use bothering about that."

Enscombe, you see, had got up on his luck again.

Averno's offer had held good, and had been carried out, and Enscombe was one of those people who, the minute he was out of his difficulties, the mercury at once leaped up. He had clean forgotten about his former apprehensions and worries. Now that he had got sufficient on hand to carry him on for some time, he didn't care whether he had to pay a hundred pounds penalty for sending a rifle bullet into a tall, and striped, and generally useless beast with spiral horns, or not.

Averno had arrived there three days ago. He had found his welcome all that might be wished. Enscombe's wife had been cordiality itself. He was in old atmosphere, and breathed it again. The whiff of the mimosa and spekboem and pepper-bosch and rhenoster, brought back all sorts of old memories to him. For the time being he actually preferred it to the whiff of petrol, to the creak of the pigskin and the stirrups, to the buzz and rush, at an appallingly illegal pace, over a tarred road through the lovely English champaign. He turned out, quite as in the old times of the past, even before his early cup of coffee had been brought in to him. He had spent an hour going round the sheep and cattle kraals, with his old friend and now host, Malpas Enscombe. And he was beginning to feel a new man.

The triple boom of a big cock ostrich rolled up through the clear, fresh morning air. Down in the camps within the, from here invisible, wire fences the great birds walked gracefully, but Heaven help any fool who should go through the fence within reach of one or more of those black terrors, for he would simply be kicked out of all his four main joints, unless he knew his way at that sort of thing, and was armed with a sturdy thorn *tak*.

But how was Averno here? It came in this way. Time had gone by since his visit to Comptonswick vicarage, and no word had come to him from Eva or any one there included. He had read Enscombe's letter again—then again; it had brought back to him—also again and again—the puff of the open veldt, and the whiff of the flowering spekboem, and the hum of the bees, diving for honey into its petals, and the grand, glorious sunlight goldening on all. There was life.

Here came in the strange, psychological contrast. This man, who had been full of the beautiful English country life—as who should not be?—now the veldt seemed to draw him. Why? Why simply because one woman had disgusted him. Funny reason isn't it? But the world is made up of funny reasons.

"I tell you what it is, old chap," said Enscombe. "That offer of yours was a devilish handsome one, and coming just when it did, saved me a lot of sleepless nights."

"Oh, bother all that," answered Averno, irritably. Then, not irritably: "Look here, Enscombe, we are pretty well old pals, aren't we? We were at St. Kirwin's together, and we had a fight, and it lasted a quarter of an hour, or very nearly, if I remember right. You licked me; if I didn't remember right I ought to swear that I licked you. Well, well, you did it, but you only did it narrowly, old chap. However, that's a detail, and if I'm in the position to help a pal, an old school pal especially, well, thank God, or any one else, that I am. So look here, don't you bother about 'obligations,' and all that. Here. You gave me this a night or two ago, didn't you?"

Averno took out half a sheet of paper. He had just filled his pipe with the usual—and unrivalled—Magaliesberg. He struck a match. Already he had turned the piece of paper into a large, but very serviceable spill. He lighted this, likewise his pipe.

"Here, what the devil are you doing?" said Enscombe, seizing his arm.

"I'm only lighting my pipe," answered Averno, tranquilly.

"Man alive," said the other. "You've only burnt an acknowledgment of a debt of a thousand pounds. That's all."

Averno laughed.

"Look here, old chap," he said. "What if I have? I've been of use to you in an emergency

but—supposing I died suddenly, where would you come in under the present circs. ? Eh ? " The other stared at him, and said nothing.

" Why," went on Averno, with a jolly laugh, " my executors would possibly press you for repayment of that thousand pounds for all you were worth, and by the logic of that thousand pounds. How's that ? "

" How's that ? Well, good God, Averno ! You *are* a record. I know you're not a rich man—only a fairly rich man, as I should estimate it, but still you lend another man a thousand pounds and light your pipe with his acknowledgment of it. Well, well, well ! What's the matter with you, anyhow ? "

" The matter with me," said Averno, clapping a gripping and muscular hand on the other's shoulder, " is that I want to see any one I like, and have been pals with, almost since we were born, in a state of freedom from infernal worry. That's all, that's all."

The cattle were standing around placidly in the kraal. The pungent scent of the kraal dust rose up from the tread of their hoofs. Both were used to this. A native woman, a nicely-shaped girl, with square shoulders and deep chest and merry eyes, was watching the milking ; was watching everything, and especially the strange *Umlungu*. Enscombe, with an eye on her, remarked—

" Entondela's hanging about as usual, trying to

steal milk. Well, I don't care a damn if she does. There's plenty of it."

Entondela, with the merry eyes, looked very much as if she were going to do that very thing, but as Enscombe said, he did not care whether she did or didn't.

The two men went out of the cattle kraal, and strolled towards the house. Then Entondela, with the merry eyes and square shoulders and deep chest, saw her chance. She just sent a glance or two over the said shapely shoulders, and then produced from under her blanket a thick piece of hollow bamboo, about a foot in length. At one end of it was a hole, giving the thing exactly the appearance of a huge whistle. The man who was milking, took it, and dipped it into the foaming pail he had just brimmed up, and handed it back to her, containing about a pint and a half of milk. She threw her blanket over it, and walked off to the hut.

Averno would have said, and we dare not swear that Enscombe would not have echoed his sentiment, although it was *his* property that was being levied on, that to watch the splendid and erect poise of that bronze-coloured girl's walk, was worth that trivial little act of pilfering, and a great deal more. However, they had now gone into the house.

Enscombe's wife was a large, full specimen of the fair-haired type, with quite a pretty face, but

what spoilt it was a habitually discontented expression—it is astonishing what a number of pretty faces are spoilt by that very expression. But—there you are.

Enscombe's daughter was a juvenile *replica* of her mother, but minus the discontented expression. She was a finely built, well set up girl of nineteen, and now she had just left the—not cheap—diocesan school for good.

She had laughing, long-lashed, violet eyes; which accounted for the name she had been given; light brown hair, a straight profile, and very white and even teeth. She had that golden-brown, sun-kissed kind of complexion which you see in English girls in oversea countries, which seems to throw out blue or violet eyes especially, to greater beauty. Now she met her father and Averno on the stoep. To the latter she had taken an instinctive liking, and he had reciprocated it. The sight of her now, greeting him with her fresh and winning smile, was all that was delightful. Most women turned on no fresh or winning smile. They often set up an attitude that brushed him all the wrong way. Now this girl, standing there framed in the doorway, with the background of towering scarp of dark bush, crowned by perpendicular red *krantzes* behind the house, made, to his mind, an exquisite picture.

"Well, Mr. Averno," she said, with a bright laugh, "I see you have tumbled into your old habits again.

The first thing you stock-farming people do, is to get up at a most ungodly hour and romp round the kraals; it isn't even second nature to you, it is first, just as it is, when two or three are gathered together on Sunday, to talk sheep and cattle."

"Violet dear, what are you talking about?" broke in her mother.

"Talking about? Why, just what I think," answered Violet, "as I always do. I think, by this time, Mr. Averno and I understand each other," and she shot a laughing glance at him. 'By this time,' meant just three days.

"Well, I think we do," said Averno, looking at the laughing, sparkling-eyed girl opposite him, for they had just sat down to breakfast. "In fact, I think we understand each other very well indeed."

Averno's lean, straight, clear-cut face, was as expressionless as a mask.

All the same, within, he was psychologically very much alive. He had dropped into what spelt relief. Relief from what? Relief from a lonely life. He had dropped into a circle of three. Mrs. Enscombe, as we have said, was far from an unattractive woman, barring her chonically discontented look, and she had made herself—for her—exceedingly agreeable to him. He liked that. Enscombe, of course, was an old friend of his, and the two were on even terms. Thrown in was

Violet, and that made the bright strand of the whole thread. So there you are.

"Well, which is it, Enscombe? Kloof or Karroo?" said Averno, "to nearly quote one of Bryden's most interesting series of yarns about this part of the country?"

"Kloof, I think," answered Enscombe. "The season is only just open, and I think we'll find the bushbuck and koodoo and other unconsidered trifles, more placid than we should find the wily, and more open-air springbuck."

"I'm coming out shooting too," said Violet.

"What," answered Averno, "can you shoot?"

The violet eyes laughed at him. "Can I shoot?"

"Well, don't you get sick when a wounded buck squeaks?"

"I don't like that of course, but sport is sport, and you can't help these things."

Here was a note that jarred. Why? It struck upon his ear as a *hard* note. Were all women hard? he wondered. He had heard a lot about the "softer" sex, but, he had come to the conclusion that it was the harder sex. There was Eva, for instance—by the way, he had tried to teach her to shoot. Directly the slightest hint of opposition came in, not necessarily opposition, but something between, only he could not quite catch the word to express it, she hardened like flint. What did this "softer sex" notion mean, he thought? Like most manly, healthy, outdoor men, the theory of the softer

sex appealed to him. He liked women to be soft and clinging, but not too idiotically so—yet he was constantly finding that it was not borne out by fact. Looking at Violet Enscombe, he would rather have thought that she wouldn't have been inclined to go out and shoot things. That was where the hardness came in. That was the note that jarred.

Enscombe said cheerily—

"All right, little one, we'll go and see what we can do in that line. We'll give you the best side of the kloof, anyway."

Soon after breakfast they started, Violet was looking more than picturesque in her saddle. She carried a light, No. 20 double-bore gun, and wore a businesslike veldt costume.

The horses kicked up enough red dust, as the trio took their way up the steep road, to the dark bush kloofs, which reared up in solemn gloom behind the house.

"Why, what's this place?" said Averno, as rounding a corner they came suddenly on a ruin, the ruin, apparently, of an old and insignificant-looking farmhouse. The thatched roof still stood, but the windows, set in the dingy whitewashed walls, looked like eye-holes staring out of a skull.

"Oh, never mind about that place," answered Enscombe, impatiently. "The less I hear about that place the better. To tell you the square truth Averno, it's a perfect nuisance, and I'm always wanting to pull it down. The natives call it *Itunzi*

yentaba, which being interpreted means, 'in the forest shade of the mountain.'"

"But why do you want to pull it down," said Averno? whom some psychological idea seemed suddenly to strike.

"Because," said the other, "the damned place is supposed to be haunted—haunted up to the roof."

"Good Lord!" said Averno, staring at the ruined shack. "Well, that *is* extraordinary."

"Yes. Three people have come up to it with the express purpose of suiciding, and have done it. Well, that's an infernal nuisance to me, you know, because I'm Field Cornet, and have to go and hold sort of inquests over them, and what I get for that isn't worth having. Why the devil they should come to select that particular shack to murder themselves in, I don't know, silly fools, but they do. Booze, of course. Why, just before you came out, one went up there and did that very thing, God knows why. He was a road inspector, by the way. But why that shack should attract people to suicide in, is utterly beyond me, but—take it or leave it."

"Oh, bother all that, father," said Violet impatiently. "Let's leave it, and get along."

But to Averno there was something strange that appealed.

There was Shotworthy's shed on his own place, and did not it hold psychic forces? He had sampled them himself, and the experience had been peculiar.

Now he felt moved to try this place by way of another experience. *Itunzi yentaba*—under the forest shade of the mountain! He thought it might bring him one. But the whole thing was such utter bosh.

CHAPTER XX

ANOTHER CALL

THE trio had not had much sport, but they had had a good and hardish day's outing which, after all, is nearly the main essence of sport. A couple of the smaller kind of buck was made fast behind their saddles, and three or four guinea-fowl hung on to the "D."

Now they were returning home, and it was raining. Enscombe was exceedingly glad, although he was wet through nearly. Violet was fairly glad, although she was ditto. Averno wasn't in the least glad, because he had no interest in any stock-farm in the Gydisdorp district, or in any other. Violet looked draggled to a certain extent. Her hair was coming down over her forehead and eyes, but still, she didn't seem to mind it, and laughed. Averno, looking at her now, seemed not to mind it either, though he had rather hated it at first, for it was a cold rain. We can't say what there was in that laugh of Violet's, but somehow it seemed to count.

"What a lot of drowned rats we look," she said.

"Never mind, Mr. Averno. If you'd had to do with dry tanks and getting your water out of the dam and boiling it, you'd know what a jubilation a lot of rain downpour meant, I can tell you. And now we are going to get one. Hurrah!"

They were now passing, on their way home, the mouth of the kloof—Dead Man's Kloof—where the old ruin stood. It was visible, just a little way off the road. Said Averno, moved by some sudden instinct—

"Let's get in here, and wait till the first shower drops." As a preliminary to big rain it always begins with a first shower.

But Enscombe seemed somehow to shy at the idea.

"Oh, I don't know, old chap. Wouldn't it be better to get on home, and have a glass or two of grog to take the wet out of us."

There was that in Enscombe's shying at the idea of entering the ruined old building, that brought back vividly to Averno's mind the little Clumber spaniel's rooted objection to entering the tarred shed at Beverstoft. He stared at the other—then in his characteristic way—

"Why, what does it mean? Are *you* afraid of the place?"

"Well, I don't know that I'm afraid of anything, except up-country fever and other ills which human flesh is heir to, but I think the prospect of getting home and a snug fire, and a glass of grog, for the

rain's coming down faster than ever, is rather a more alluring one, don't you ? "

" Well, perhaps," answered the other in an ordinary tone. " Let's get on."

This had, as the French say, ' given him furiously to think.'

And what he thought was that he would come back to this place on his own. There was something very curiously coincident about the dog and the man. A little while ago he would have voted it sheer idiocy, now—both animal and human, his animal and this human, objected to going into two certain spots built over—Built over ! Why ? Then the consideration of " built over " struck him—struck him especially. Supposing both places had been in the open ? Where came in the difference ? There was the tarred shed in the middle of the woods on his own land. Here was a ruined, but still *roofed* house, six thousand miles away on another man's land. The first every one shied at because some one had murdered another and hung himself in it. The second, because some one else had done precisely the same thing, and yet both seemed to hold exactly the same " influences " over all who knew both spots. What in the world had the *covered in* process to do with it ? He himself had walked among skulls and bones at night, on the battlefield o Nodwengu—or Ulundi, as *we* call it, and the Zulus don't—also those of Isandhlwana and Kambula, and the poor grinning skulls looked up to him

in the moonlight, and he had picked some of them up and examined them, and had even interestedly determined the nationality by their teeth and frontal development, but there was nothing on earth about them to suggest anything uncanny. Yet now, simply because it was under cover, otherwise under a roof, the element of the supernatural came in. Why? In the first instance an animal in far away England had seemed to grip some sense of it. In the next, a man here, supposed to be the more intelligent animal, seemed to have shied at going into an old and ruined building. That struck him as idiotic. Yet, looking back at his own experience in the tarred shed, he didn't know what to make of it. It seemed an absolute puzzler.

Violet's clear, fluty voice broke upon his meditations.

"*I* think we had better get on home," she said. "I know I'm wet enough, and all the rest of it."

"Oh! certainly," said Averno. "I was forgetting."

When they got back to *Itunzi yentaba*, for the native name applied both to the homestead and the ruined shack a mile higher up, they found Mrs. Enscombe in not altogether a good humour, but this was chronic with her, so they didn't mind it. Enscombe had warned Averno that it might be sometimes that way, so *he* didn't mind it, although he had had to do with women that way, and disliked the proceeding, still he

didn't dislike it in this case, or had taught himself to think he didn't, and the reason was, that this particular woman had showed a certain amount of subtle partiality for him. We had said that she was a fine specimen of womanhood, and attractive to the eye. Now, by the fact of not being in a good humour, she was beginning to spoil the show.

Averno was particularly susceptible to a pleasant greeting from the other sex. He liked it smiling, not the reverse. Now it was the reverse, and—he didn't like it. As we have said, he hated women in a bad temper.

She began to nag.

"Well, Malpas. You're nice and late, aren't you, coming back in a rainstorm and flooding out the house in your wet clothes, and as for Violet, well—she's as tough as an elephant, and she's flooding out the house too."

Averno repressed the inclination to remark—

"And am I flooding out the house too, Mrs. Enscombe?" Yet he was disgusted. Were all women cast in the same mould, he thought; hard, uncongenial? Then he looked at it in an analytical light. Here was a man who had been out all day on the veldt. Here was a girl who had been out all day on the veldt, and both had come back soaked through with rain—incidentally such a welcome rain, that if it kept its promise it would be worth hundreds of pounds to them—and yet the first thing this woman did, on their arrival

home, was to nag the pair of them. *Whau!* She hadn't nagged him, but she looked as if she would have liked to.

"Well," said Violet calmly, "I don't see that there's anything to make a fuss about," and she sat down on a chair and stretched her toes out to the fire. "We're not made of sugar or salt, or anything that will melt."

"Now then, Averno," said Enscombe, with a combination of testily and heartily, "we are going to have a glass or two of grog on the strength of our wetting. Rather!"

They hadn't bothered about changing after their wetting. They were both in front of the fire. For a South African rain at any time of the year generally spells cold, wherefore the fire. Although not in the cold months, people don't change from wetting after a long drought in the same latitude, on the contrary they put on a mackintosh, or not, and go out and enjoy it if only for a sense of novelty. Now these two felt thoroughly snug and jolly before the fire, as they sat there smoking excellent Magaliesberg, which is the best tobacco in the world. To them, directly, in came Violet; radiant, fresh-coloured, from the rain on her face. She jumped upon her father's knee, and flung a loving arm around his neck.

"Well, old man?" she said, "we've had no end of a day of it. I cut down a guinea-fowl and a half—half got away, except that some jackal will

get it to-night, which will be good for the jackal; it's good that something should be good for somebody or something; and in this instance my guinea-fowl half-shot will be good for something."

Now this started Averno on the "think" again. The hardness of the other sex to wit. The girl hadn't any sex sympathy as to inflicting pain; all she seemed to think of was the material side of it, and the material use of something which she had killed for fun, to—something else.

This seemed to ring a wrong note. Why? He was a sportsman himself. He killed things for fun, well—why shouldn't other people? A girl. Logical! yet you can't be "logical" in everyday life. You ought to be, but you can't. Subtle! That was the word; there's where it came in. And the distinction spelt hardness.

As we have said, hardness in the other sex repelled him, and it seemed more and more to him now, that members of the other sex who killed things spelt hardness. Hardness! That diabolical word. He looked at the laughing, violet-eyed face, and thought.

Hardness was not the characteristic of femininity theoretically, but—in actuality? *Whau!* there was no softness in the other sex he decided. It was indiarubber or anything you like, but it certainly wasn't soft. He remembered Eva, and her attitude towards himself, and the note that had struck him in regard to that was the lack of feminine softness,

She had shown herself hard, utterly hard, and that was a defect which on the part of the sex repelled him. Now this girl, with the attractive colouring and violet eyes, was showing herself hard, and although that didn't affect him as the other had, it took off from her.

He began to think that he would soon become a misogynist. He thought of Eva Passinghame, and how delightful and altogether charming, in the literal sense of the word, she had made life for him during that brief fortnight they had spent, all so unexpectedly, together. Very well. Then had come that sudden and repellent change. She had shown herself an utterly different being. Now this girl was not an intrepid interrupter of political meetings by conviction, but all of a sudden struck the same sort of note of hardness. Well, after all it was no concern of his; he had no interest in her except she was a remarkably pretty girl, which is sufficient excuse for interest on the part of any healthily-minded male it stands to reason. He looked at her long and curiously. She had closed her eyes, the bow of the long lashes was thrown in relief against the sun-kissed cheek, and she made just about as alluring a picture of pretty girlhood as a man could wish to gaze upon critically, or the reverse. Now Averno was gazing upon it critically.

What next?

"Hullo, old chap," said Enscombe. "It's about time we went and got our eye-teeth into some

skoff; it's after time, or we may catch it. The Missis seems a bit ratty this evening."

That startled Averno off again on his recent train of thoughts.

"'The Missis seems a bit ratty,'" he quoted to himself, with curling contempt. "Good Lord! is all creation to be dependent on this or that woman's moods or tempers?"

The room to which they adjourned was sufficiently bright and cheerful. Violet looked sparkling, and Mrs. Enscombe, an attractive-looking woman, as we have said, had recovered her good-humour, and therefore looked her best. The two men felt fit and jolly after their day out, wherefore there was general harmony all round. Averno thought he had never felt more jolly and comfortable in his life. They were going over their day's doings again, were making jokes and exchanging chaff, when—a knock came at the door.

"*Maglig!* what the devil's that," said Enscombe. "Can't a man have his skoff in peace without being kicked up at any hour of the day or night? I suppose it means that some one's come to tell me that another fool has come to grief in the old ruin."

And this is exactly what it did mean.

CHAPTER XXI

ANOTHER VICTIM

ENSCOMBE got up and went to the back door. This time, the bearer of the tidings was a yellow Hottentot, and a very badly scared yellow Hottentot at that.

"Well, what's the matter?" said Enscombe, speaking in the Boer *taal.*

"*Myn lieve Baas,*" answered the other, who was shaking and shivering with fright, as if he had ague. "There's another man up there in the old house who's dead."

Enscombe looked at him sharply. It was a bright moonlight night, but he didn't know the fellow's face. Questioned, the latter said he belonged to a gang of road menders, that had just camped on the outskirts of the place.

"Now look here *jou schepsel,*" repeated Enscombe sharply. "What sort of lie is this you are bringing here now? You don't think I'm going to believe that any Hottentot would go near the old house at this time of night, even to save his yellow soul?

What do you mean by inventing such a story as this, anyhow ? " It will be observed that Enscombe was not soothing in his manner towards the inferior races, but then, he knew them. This scion of an inferior race—of a very inferior race—here protested that what he said was perfectly true. He was on his way to his brother's at Meintjes Hoek ; where they had slaughtered a goat, and were going to have a meat feast ; and to get there, he had been obliged to pass the old house, or not go at all.

" That, or a big drunk, is about the only thing that would take a Hottentot past the old ruin," laughed Averno, who had come out to take part in the *indaba.* " What's your name ? "

" Marthinus, Baas."

" And what made you go into the old house ? " said Enscombe, with something of a sneer.

" Go into it, Baas ? " explained the other, vehemently. " Why, I wouldn't do such a thing at night if I had to lose my brother's goat feast ten times over. Go into it ? *Allamagtig !* Nay what ! even in the daytime I wouldn't go into it."

" Well then, *jou eselkop,*" went on Enscombe, who felt rather short at being disturbed in the middle of his dinner. " How the devil did you know that there was another man up there in the old house, who's dead ? I suppose he didn't sing out and tell you so ? "

" Baas, he was lying half in and half out ; his

legs were out, and the rest of him was in. Then I came along here to tell the Baas."

"Well, he may have been drunk," said Enscombe. "Here's a holy joke, Averno; I suppose I shall have to go and make an investigation, but I'm blowed if I'll go to-night; far too much trouble. I'll leave it till the morning."

"There'll be devilish little to make investigations on by that time," said Averno. "At any rate with a view to identity. Why, the jackals will have skoffed him by that time." Then to the Hottentot: "Was he a white man, Marthinus?"

"I don't know, Baas. His boots looked as if he was."

"Well, Averno, it's a most disgusting nuisance. I shall have to go up there and see into this; if you like to come and give me a hand I'll be glad, because not one of my 'boys' would poke his nose inside that shack at this time of night if you offered him a double handful of sovereigns."

"That's the very thing," agreed Averno. "I've intended to investigate that beauty spot of yours, and couldn't possibly do it under better circumstances."

"We'll finish our dinner first," said Enscombe. "Well, Marthinus, you can get away to your great feed now." But the fellow asked if he couldn't have some tobacco; and also some coffee and sugar to enliven the said feast, would be very acceptable.

"Ah yes, I was forgetting," said Enscombe. "You'll be wanted as a witness in this business, Marthinus, so you'd better tell me all about yourself, and where you are to be found."

The fellow did so, and then Enscombe went inside to his storeroom, and gave him a liberal dole of the three articles dear to the heart and palate of uncivilized man, the world over—certainly to those of every uncivilized man we have ever seen or heard of.

The two returned into the cheerful, lighted room.

"The rest of the dinner is getting cold, Malpas," said Mrs. Enscombe, rather snappily. "What has all the talk been about, and who was it?"

"Oh, nothing of any importance," he answered, trying to throw her a warning glance. Violet was not nervous as girls go, but she had only just come back from school, and hadn't known anything of the former tragic happenings, although she knew the place had an evil reputation of some sort. Anyhow, they might just as well finish their dinner in peace.

But Violet's mother was one of those obtuse women, who must needs hammer away at a subject.

"Why Malpas, I do believe it is another of them," she said, with a start of horror, not undashed with alarm. "Why, this will make the fourth of them."

Violet's eyes opened.

"The fourth of who?" she exclaimed, interestedly, if ungrammatically.

"Oh, nothing, dear," said her father, rather disgustedly. "Remember I'm Field Cornet, and people are always bringing in reports of things, that's all."

"Men were deceivers ever," says the divine William, but the capacity of women for *being* deceived is non-existent when compared with that of men. There seems to be a sort of unerring what we will call *flair*, for want of a better word, vested in the—so-called—softer sex, which is almost uncanny; the point of which is that Violet was not deceived by her father's explanation at all. It was very certain that something had happened, and that of a tragical nature, and very near at hand. She had even caught a word or two of the conversation outside, and now that same wonderful feminine instinct led her to connect it somehow or other with the old ruin. That instinct became still more acute when, dinner over, her father announced that he had occasion to go out for a little while; it wouldn't be for long; and Averno in the most casual way, as if the subject had never been mooted before, said he'd go too. Violet promptly pronounced her intention of making a third. But here, her mother did begin to show some sense. She declared she didn't want to be left alone that evening, in fact wouldn't be. So that saved the situation, as far as the two men were concerned.

The said two now set forth,

"I think we'd better walk, Averno," said Enscombe. "It isn't worth while bothering to saddle up a couple of horses just for that short distance, to say nothing of stirring up the women like a disturbed henroost."

"I quite agree to that, in fact I prefer it."

"So long, you two," sung out Enscombe. "Averno and I are going for a moonlight stroll. We've got a little business to talk over;" and without waiting for any answer, he led the way at a smart pace up the road. He had a hard, businesslike Kafir knobkerrie in his hand, which he swung as he walked briskly along. Averno had something harder, and just as businesslike in his pocket; he didn't swing that, but if occasion came he would drop it to the level. There was something about this *indaba* he decided, which wanted looking into, and here seemed a royal time for doing it.

As they walked up the road, Enscombe swinging his kerrie carelessly, lightheartedly—Enscombe was rather a matter-of-fact mortal, you see, and as he himself said, he was infernally fed up with that wretched old haunted shack of his, and all the people who came and died there. He was getting used to it, and familiarity breeds contempt, as the old saw hath it. Why the devil couldn't they go and expire somewhere else? The thing was becoming a bore, a nuisance; in fact it was getting monotonous. And he said as much to Averno. Replied the latter—

"Enscombe, you're missing things. You're up

against something now that's interesting; quite out of the way interesting; and all you do is to lapse into commonplace, and call it a bore."

"Well, but—*Magtig!* old chap, isn't it a bore to be dragged away from one's jolly dinner table, when we are all snug and comfy, after a day's shoot, and incidentally, a beastly bad one?"

"I don't know," said Averno, stopping and looking upward and around. "It's a lovely night anyhow, after a three hours of good soaking in rain," and he handed his tobacco bag to his companion.

Both men crammed their pipes, refilling them, transport-rider fashion, by loading up fresh tobacco on top of the smoked-out moiety already there. And so, talking on other subjects, they drew nearer and nearer to their objective.

Somehow or other as they drew near it, Enscombe's talk seemed to lose in lightness, and this Averno noticed. He remembered how Enscombe had hurried him on, when he had suggested sheltering in the old ruin during the pelting shower. And he decided that Enscombe was not really so light-hearted on the subject under discussion, as he affected to be. And now the place stood out in front of them in the moonlight, gaping and ghastly, its windows suggesting the eyes of a four-eyed skull, from its steep, falling, scarped, background of dark dense bush. The resonant bark of a sentinel baboon boomed forth then reverberated among the crags overhead. It was repeated again and again.

The cold moon, with its ruthless human countenance, lighted up the sweep of forest and the white riband of road up which they had come, and the weird, wailing call of the plover overhead, and the shrill, long-drawn bay of a hunting jackal beneath, answered by its mate, somehow here seemed to take on a significant keeping with the associations of the place.

"Well, here we are," said Enscombe, as they approached the front of the house. "I wonder if that infernal Tottie has been feeding us up with some damn lie."

"No, he hasn't," answered Averno. "That's his description right enough."

In the full moonlight, the legs of a human being, and nearly half of the rest of him, were visible—their owner lying face downwards through the half-open doorway, half in, half out. Enscombe lighted a stable lantern which he had brought with him.

"Now," he said, "we have got to investigate this, so we had better get inside and inspect the 'subject.' It's a rotten job, and I don't see why it should always be tumbling my way. However, let's get it over."

They had to step over the body to enter the building. The interior was black as ink, in contrast to the moonlight outside. The body was that of a middle-aged man of ordinary appearance. Both were strong, hard-set men, who had faced death more than once had looked on it many more

times, and yet here was something that was clean outside their experience. The face wore an appearance of such unutterable horror and dread as even they had never seen before implanted on any human countenance. They had seen faces; hundreds of them; of those who had fallen in savage warfare, both white and black, but never had they seen in death such a look of agonized terror, as that which was stamped on this one. Both men looked at one another.

"What the devil does it mean, Averno?" said Enscombe, his own face rather white.

"Mean?" said the other, who was not similarly affected. "I can't tell, but, this one hasn't died from scare alone. The top part of his clothing is saturated with blood."

Enscombe whistled.

"Oh, is it? Well that reduces it to the material at any rate. Now Averno, lend a hand, and we'll heave the poor devil in and shut him in, and continue our investigation in the morning. Ugh! I'm thoroughly fed up with this job, and as a grateful Government pays me nothing for my services, I don't propose to stretch power for gratitude to breaking point. So now we'll go home."

"I'd stick it a little longer, Enscombe, if I were you. It's worth going into, now we're on the spot. Here, hold up that stable lantern of yours, and let's have a look. Ah-h!"

He had turned down the collar of the dead

man's coat. On the shoulder, inside the collar-bone, was a clean cut on which the blood was hardly even dry, then he unbuttoned and turned down his shirt. "It's a peculiar place to be stabbed in," he said. "Still more so to stab himself, but this one has got it, if I am not mistaken, right through to the heart—from above. From above," he repeated.

Instinctively both looked up. The torn canvas ceiling hung nearly half in strips, showing the trailing thatch above.

"Well, what do you make of it, old Sherlock Holmes?" said Enscombe.

"Make of it?" was the answer. "That will be daylight work; spoor and other things, you understand."

"Oh, yes," said Enscombe disgustedly. "I know I'm fed up with the whole bally business. I wish I could sell this old shack to a circus or a museum, or a society of crack-brained spiritualists. Now to-morrow, we'll have to arrange for holding an inquest, and get out Hastley"—Hastley was the District Surgeon. "Well, we can't do anything now at any rate, so let's clear."

They found rather a difficulty in getting the badly hung, worm-eaten old door to shut, but they managed at last by dint of making it fast with bits of *reimpje*.

As they took their way down the road again, they were conscious of a change. The stars had become

obliterated, and the moon showed wanly through the murk, then came a lightning flash and a growl of thunder.

"That means more rain to-night," said Averno. "It will spoil your investigation to-morrow, old chap. Blot out spoor, you know."

CHAPTER XXII

IN A NEW LIGHT

"WHAT bosh, dad! Why, he's quite an old fogey. He must be as old as you." Violet's clear laugh rang out on the equally clear morning air.

"Well, no, not quite," said Enscombe. "And look what a fine, well set up chap he is. Jolly snug property in England too. Why, here's the chance of your life."

"That's all very well," laughed the girl. "But he's too old. Why, weren't you at school together —at school together mind—and yet you're rotting me about a man old enough to be my father."

"Oh, well, dear, in these days it isn't so very far apart. You all get younger, and so do we. Perhaps we get even younger than you do. Eh?"

If there is one thing that is perfectly amazing, it is the utterly careless want of calculation which people give to the carrying power of the human voice. Atmospheric conditions, thinness of house

walls, even the key or compass of one voice compared with that of another, all tell, and everybody lightly and airily disregards it. These two strolling up to the house from the fruit garden, were a case in point; consequently, it is not wonderful that Philip Averno, just coming out on the *stoep*, on this dazzling, cloudless, but above all clear-atmosphered morning, should have caught just that part of this *persiflage* that we have set down. He began to fill his pipe with his usual tranquility of movement and demeanour; aware, while not looking at them, that the two were trying to hush each other into talking in a lower tone or about something else. There could be no mistake as to who was referred to, he knew. Was he getting so very old then, as this lighthearted, sunny-faced girl had seemed to think? And it set him thinking. What if Eva Passinghame's offhand treatment of him had been due to this idea? Perhaps it had. Perhaps she had regretted having entered into so hurried an engagement with him, and had taken her own way out of it. In a flash, even before the two approaching had reached the *stoep*, the recollection of the time that they had spent together, alone, absolutely alone, at his own beautiful English home, and had revelled together in all the beauties of the fields and woods, came back to him now. He had not taken that break off so easily as might have been thought, that hard, gusty man. But it was precisely because he was hard that he had taken it at all. He had thought

he had been treated rather heartlessly then : now, in the lighthearted badinage between a light-hearted girl and her father, another reason seemed to open up. That was it ; he was too old. And then, a little consoling cherub seemed to come and squat on his shoulder and remind him of that interrupted political meeting, and how many of that evil-faced, snarling crowd he had knocked silly on the occasion. That did not look like decrepitude, did it ? All this within the minute or two it took for the approaching pair to join him.

A month had gone by since the affair in Dead Man's Kloof. There had been an inquest on the body found there. But it had resulted in nothing at all. Even as Averno had predicted, there had been a heavy rain-storm that night, and this had obliterated all spoor or other trace anywhere around the house or its immediate propinquity. The dead man had been identified as a travelling bricklayer, who took on jobs to run up brick additions to this, or that, farmhouse that wanted them, and who spent his time between such jobs in getting blind to the world in whatever tinpot township pub. he happened to strike first. No one seemed to have any interest in him, and there the matter dropped.

A couple of hours later, on that same blue, clear,

cloudless morning, Averno and Violet were riding up the steep rocky road from Enscombe's place, but in the opposite direction from that of Dead Man's Kloof. It led up through a narrow *poort*. The spreuws piped and whistled merrily under the *krantzes* which overhung the road. Here and there, an armour-plated tortoise, shuffling amid the stones, shot his head back into his shell and lay low until they had passed. A long, whip-like tree snake glinted swiftly across the path, while a troop of monkeys, skipping from bough to bough, in a row of yellow-wood trees overhanging their way, chattered and jibbered.

"Oh, let's shoot some of these," said Violet eagerly—she had her gun with her, a light double No. 20 bore. "Mischievous little brutes, they play Harry with our oranges and peaches. There are too many of them, they want keeping down." She had already slid from her saddle to the ground, and was running lightly up to one of the yellow-wood trees, where several monkeys were squatting and chattering. Averno, sitting in his saddle, saw her gun go up, then half down, then up again, then there was a double report. Something thudded to the ground and began to squeal. Averno saw her put up her gun again. There was another report, and it squealed no more.

"Got one of them," she laughed over her shoulder. "No; I don't think I'll get another shot, they've all scooted."

Averno, watching this, felt an intuitive disgust. Hardness again! And somehow came back to him the rejoinder he had heard this girl make to her father, during the chaffing conversation which he had overheard. Here was this bright, laughing girl deliberately and cold-bloodedly taking life, and that not in the least necessarily nor even in the form of sport. For monkeys were not game. He might be an old fogey, as she had said, but he certainly didn't seem entranced with the idea of women indulging in deliberate bloodshed unnecessarily.

The pair were bound for Meintje's Hoek, in search of guinea-fowl mainly, or any unconsidered trifles. Averno carried an ordinary double-barrel shot gun, a very tried and trusted weapon.

As they came over the neck, and paused to breathe their puffing and panting horses, the panorama in front of them was one of marvellous beauty, for they were looking into a great basin-like hollow. Tall cliffs locked it in on three sides, their ironstone faces gleaming red-bronze in the sun. At the further end, right opposite, soared a stately mountain peak. The floor of this crater-like hollow, which covered a large area, was grown with clumps of spekboem at intervals, interspersed with the lighter green of the mimosa. It was a very paradise for the mixed small game in which this section of country abounded, indeed, even now as they looked down into it, the grating cackle of a troop of guinea-

fowl, and that by no means far away, came to their ears.

"We ought to get some of these," said Violet. "Shall we leave the horses here, Mr. Averno, and go down quietly, or ride down and try and cut them off? I know where they'll make for, it'll be that clump of spekboem that you see behind that *krantz* sticking out there. That'll be their line, I've shot them here before."

The metallic grating sound became plainer and plainer; it was evident that the birds were not alarmed, for they were coming towards them. Averno, for once, felt scant interest in their movements; his interest, if anything, was centred upon his companion. What a lovely girl she was, he thought, looking at the flushed sparkling face, yet why was that face flushed and sparkling? Why, at the prospect of killing something. The softer sex! Well, that was hardly fair perhaps, he told himself. After all, sport is sport, and even for one of the softer sex it was a clean healthy thing, which some up-to-date pursuits and pastimes affected by the latter by no means were.

Leaving the horses, they went as swiftly and noiselessly as possible down through the bush. The grating cackle suddenly took on a note of loud alarm, then a cloud of great dark birds—for the wild guinea-fowl is larger, and of darker marking, than his barnyard brother—arose, almost over their heads. Four reports rang out, so simultaneously as to seem

almost like a single one. Four of that flock fell beautifully to earth, and the manner of their fall, and the thud wherewith they hit solid earth, told that not one of them was a "runner."

Averno looked at his companion, and whistled.

"Well, well," he said. "You do know how to handle your shooting stick, and no mistake."

Violet looked pleased.

"Yes," she answered, "I'm glad you think so. You know, Mr. Averno, I hope you don't think all sorts of things of me, because I like shooting. By rights of course, I oughtn't to have a soul above anything but croquet, or some such inanity, but I like this sort of thing, and so I do it."

The other laughed. This was exactly his own doctrine, as we have shown. Looking at her now, he smiled grimly to himself at that very thought. His former prejudices were fast disappearing.

"I think," he said, "if we get on, we shall be able to break up the troop, and then won't we make a bag? He led the way back to where they had left the horses. The birds were hung on to the saddles, and they dived down through the bush to where they knew the troop of guinea-fowl would lie.

But the birds were wild, and ran before they could get at anything like within shot, except one straggling one, which being alone rose, and Averno bagged, and then they saw the whole troop rise in the distance and fly right awav to the other end of the hollow.

"Well, we've got something to go on with at any rate," said Averno, as he fastened the last bird on to his saddle. "I think we'd better lead. For my part, I always find that I can shoot much better on Shanks' mare."

"So do I," said Violet. "If you shoot from the saddle, your fool of a horse always does some rotten jerky trick or other, and you are bound to miss."

They quartered the hollow in a businesslike way, picking up a bird here and there, but saw no more of that troop of guinea-fowl. And soon a brace of healthy appetites warned the owners thereof that it was time for lunch.

"We'll go to the usual place," said Violet. "It's ideal."

It took them not many minutes to reach it. And it certainly was ideal.

It was right under the face of a *krantz*, cool and fresh. Great trees in front threw a shade that way, and down a cleft in the rock a runlet of water trickled, fringed by masses of delicate maidenhair fern.

"Well, this is jolly and no mistake," said Averno, unhitching a saddle bag, and proceeding to unpack it. We may mention that its contents corresponded with Averno's description of the spot, as he sat there thoroughly comfortable and at his ease. He came to the conclusion that Violet Enscombe was a very lovely girl indeed; but all the while he was thinking

of the bantering conversation he had overheard between her and her father that morning. It was rather sad when he came to think of its burden. He could see his face in the basin of the little spring just now, and it certainly was looking very lined, not to say gaunt. Well, well—what did it matter?

"What are you thinking about, Mr. Averno?" said Violet, with a mischievous gleam in her eyes.

"Thinking? Why, I was thinking how you managed if you shot a buck while you were by yourself."

Violet didn't believe this. She shook her head.

"You weren't thinking of anything so trifling as that I know," she answered.

"Well, but what do you do?" he persisted. "The cutting open, and all that nasty part of the business I mean."

As a matter of fact, he himself had let two bucks go that morning, which he couldn't possibly have missed, because of that said nasty part of the business when with her.

"I never do shoot a buck when I'm alone, for that very reason, only birds."

The girl chattered on, but Averno was rather silent. He was studying her, while not appearing to do so. Fancy Enscombe owning such a picture as this.

"How many proposals have you had?" he said, suddenly.

She started, coloured a little, then laughed.

"Well, really, Mr. Averno, that *is* a question."

"Meaning you're not going to answer it. No woman ever will, and I've asked several." His tone was so drily deprecatory that Violet burst out laughing. Such a whole-souled, tuneful laugh, that it was good to hear.

"But why should they?" she said.

"Well, you see, I might have to make one myself some day, and naturally I would want to know how it's done."

The girl's eyes grew round, and the laugh deepened.

"Oh! oh! oh! that's interesting," she answered. "Who, when and where?"

He didn't reply for a moment. He was looking lazily up to the tree tops.

"No one, no when, and no where."

"Oh!" she said, disappointedly. Then catching at a straw—

"But I don't believe it. You've changed your mind, and are not going to tell me."

"Can't tell you what doesn't exist. I only said I *might* have to, remember."

He was nearly adding—

"Besides, I'm too old," but refrained, on the ground that it would be unfair to take advantage of an overheard conversation, and she would be sharp enough to put two and two together.

The while, Violet was thinking what an oddity her father's friend and old schoolfellow was. She was also owning to herself that she was beginning to think him rather an interesting one.

CHAPTER XXIII

"QUITE AN OLD FOGEY"

THEY rode out from their resting-place, and resumed operations. Averno cut down a bustling, squawking cock koorhaan, which had risen about sixty yards in front—you always need a close-shooting gun for mixed shooting like this. Violet accounted for the corresponding hen, and so they went on, picking up unconsidered trifles, such as two or three dikkop, and an odd quail. Again, Averno spared the life of a duiker ram, which had jumped up right under his feet, for the reason which we heard stated above.

"The charm of this kind of sport," he said, as they came together for a moment in the course of their beat, "lies in the element of unexpectedness. You never know what is going to get up at any time. But if you've got No. 4, and a close-shooting, hard-driving gun like I have, that will account for anything you are likely to find in this sort of veldt. It's just as good in its way as big up-country shooting; there it's one shot and a hooroosh, and you've a

beast lying there kicking, as large as, or larger than a bullock, and there's an end of it, except a lot of horrid butchering that comes in next."

Violet laughed.

"I expect that's shocking heresy in the nostrils of an up-country going man. Why, it's always been father's ambition to go up-country, and do a big game shoot. He's never been able to do it, you know."

"Well, I have, and on the whole, I believe I prefer this kind of thing. Now look at all this," halting and looking all around. "Half the pleasure of all outdoor sport, is in its surroundings. Look at this, for instance. The golden glory of the sunset, burning red upon the face of the *krantzes* there. At this time of the afternoon, on a day like this, you couldn't possibly get anything more perfect, and which I defy any artist to produce on canvas, than this particular glow, I have never seen it anywhere but in this country. Well, now, what a setting that is for what we're engaged in. And the health of it all! No malaria or anything of that kind here. We return home healthily tired, and no chance of having to roll up in six blankets the next morning, and in deadly shivers even then.

This disertation, which was rather a prosy one for Averno, seemed to interest his hearer in him even more. It seemed as if his ingrained love of Nature and Nature's effects, which had so captivated Eva Passinghame, to the extent of affecting her with

them to a certain degree, was communicating itself to this girl too.

"Why, Mr. Averno," she said, "I shouldn't have thought you were such an enthusiast. But now you point it out, I do see what you mean, and it seems to put it in a new light, I shall see all this differently now."

The afternoon was wearing on. They had come beneath the shadow of the soaring mountain peak which has been mentioned. On one side of this, the abrupt mountain scarp was cleft by a defile.

"This is our boundary," said Violet.

"Well, let's ride a little way down here," suggested Averno. "It looks rather picturesque in front."

"All right. By the way, there's a kraal down here of particularly *schelm* Kafirs, a little further on. They're squatters on Zwaart Hendrik Nel's place; the old sweep has no business to allow them there at all. They are rank thieves, but we never send anything in this direction, so it doesn't matter to us."

"Oh, yes, I know the situation," said Averno. "Well, let's go down the *poort* anyway. The wonder is, that under the cirtumstances there's as much to shoot in the hoek as there is. You'd have thought they'd have cleared it all out."

"So they would have," answered Violet, "but father took care of that. He told them that the place was simply strewn with 'pills,' and that any

dog getting in there would swallow enough strychnine to render him useless for ever, there and then. That's why we had a fairly decent shoot to-day, instead of none at all, and what's more it was true."

"That was cute, anyway," said the other.

The defile, down which they were passing, was narrow, and so was the path, along which they had to ride single file. Thick bush grew down to it on either side, relieved by light plumbago blossoms, and here and there where a gap occurred, the dull red bloom of the pineapple-shaped aloe, then a miniature *krantz*, crested with a row of euphorbia, their stems, equi-distant apart, looking like organ pipes. A crimson-winged louri shot across the path, followed by another; each making a green and crimson flash in the vivid sunlight, and through the feathering forest trees which crowned the sky-line. The now sinking sun was darting a golden radiance upon this wild and beautiful scene.

The path wound onwards, then the bush suddenly opened. They passed a rock corner, and now entered a small hollow, comparatively free from vegetation.

"Look!" said Violet, "there's the kraal I was talking about."

Several untidy-looking huts and two or three tumble-down goat enclosures, their thorn fences more or less breached, made up the kraal aforesaid. The blue smoke curled from the roof of one of the huts, forming the inevitable ingredient to the whiff

of every native kraal;' a combination of wood-smoke and animal matter. A few kids, skipping about the broken-down goat kraals aforesaid, were bleating shrilly. But beyond this there were no signs of life about the place. In a moment there were.

Three great dogs, springing up from among the huts, charged forward, with open-mouthed clamour, upon the intruders. They looked about as formidable as the same number of wolves, if not more so. They seemed to be a cross between a Kafir greyhound of the best type, and the bullet-headed Boer mastiff. There was no stopping them. Straight at the new arrivals they came, and without any preliminary warning, one, a great brindled beast, leaped at Violet. Luckily, her horse shied, or she would have been dragged from the saddle. As it was, the brute's champing jaws tore away a strip from her riding-skirt.

Averno's action was characteristic. He backed his own mount so as to get on the near side of hers, then, holding his gun in one hand, pistol wise, he drew trigger. The ferocious and aggressive brute fell over with scarcely a kick in him. The charge of No. 4 "balling" at point blank, had drilled such a hole through him in exactly the right place as to lay him out completely. Then Averno turned his attention to another of the beasts, and with like effect. The third thought it sound judgment to withdraw.

But here came in the second act of the melodrama.

For the owners now thought it time to put in an appearance in the shape of four big Kafirs of a particularly evil cast of countenance. Each carried the usual ironwood pair of knob-kerries. Having heard the sound of the shooting, together with the snarling and baying of the dogs, they had guessed what had happened, and their demeanour was no less aggressive than that of their dogs had been.

"Stop," cried Averno, speaking in the Xosa. "I'm going to shoot, after six steps nearer. We've got four lives here, and there are only four of you. No, stop—I mean it," sharply, covering the foremost.

It seemed to tell. They halted, growling.

"That's wise," he went on. "I'll drive as big a hole in you as I have in your dogs, if you move. Oh, I should enjoy blowing the heads off the lot of you."

The speaker's native gustiness, you see, was upon him again in earnest.

But although the Kafirs had halted, it was by no means certain that they would not change their minds. The while, the idea occurred to Averno, that even if they did not, how were the two of them going to effect a retreat, in that they couldn't turn their backs. If there is one thing in the world that the wild Kafir has an affection for, it is his dog. His children may be half-starved in time of stress, but not his dog. Averno knew this, and knowing it, realized that he had four exasperated barbarians to

deal with. Then he overheard one of the four remark in an undertone—

"Let us rush them. They dare not shoot us."

"Dare I not?" answered Averno. "So much so, that if you don't go back immediately, I'll begin now."

The situation was strained. Averno, who had managed to reduce his horse to a state of quietude, looked exceedingly determined and dangerous. The girl, too, had dropped her gun to the level of their middle, and looked as if she could use it equally with her male escort; moreover, looked as if she would use it. Here was a deadlock. Which would give way first? Averno dared not, for he knew the moment they turned their horses round, the exasperated barbarians would rush forward and knock one, or both of them, from their saddles, with hurled kerries. It was all very well to bluff, and say you'd shoot if they didn't go back, but that was a very different thing to shooting if they came on. And they showed no sign of an intention of going back. They stood there, looking sullenly defiant.

"What are we going to do?" said Violet, in an undertone. "I suppose we can't stick here all day like this, or all night rather, for it's getting on for sundown."

"Let's try *indaba*," said Averno. "I don't like climbing down, and if I were by myself I wouldn't."

Forthwith, he began to harangue the opposing force. He pointed out that they had no business

to keep such dangerous brutes, which had come within the breadth of a hand of pulling his companion from her saddle. That was why he had shot them. He could summon them to the *kantoor* at Gydisdorp, and have them heavily fined for keeping dangerous dogs. There was a law against it—and so on.

They consulted in a quick undertone among themselves. Then one asked: Would *Umlungu* pay for the dogs?

Averno thought that this was rather adding insult to injury. The absurdity of the situation, too, struck him. Here were two people, armed with double guns, held up by four armed with sticks; but in the heart of the Colony as they were, the law counted for something, in fact for a great deal. The use of firearms, except in the extreme of necessity, might be followed by very unpleasant results, an expensive legal trial, if not worse. Wherefore he parleyed. And then, all unexpectedly, came diversion.

It came in the shape of three horsemen, who now appeared riding up the path beyond the kraal. These, on approach, proved to be Hendrik Nel, the owner of the place, with his son and nephew.

Averno noted with huge satisfaction, that they all had rifles.

They came up, and shook hands all round. Then there was a great hubbub raised by the Kafirs, who pointed to the slain dogs and wanted to know what

was going to be done. But Averno told his tale, and the Dutchman, who was not keen on their having dogs at all, felt inwardly grateful to Averno, and rounding upon his questionable tenants, told them that it served them right.

Matters being thus adjusted, the four dissatisfied barbarians retired, growling; and Averno and Violet, after a few remarks on the character of their shoot and so forth, retired in the opposite direction, not growling.

"I tell you what it is, Violet," remarked Averno, as having gained their own ground again, they were riding across the hollow, homeward bound—Violet smiled slightly to herself, at the unconscious way in which he had used her name. But then, was he not her father's old schoolfellow? "I tell you what it is, you'd better not come here by yourself just yet awhile; much better not. It might prove unhealthy."

"I shouldn't wonder," she answered with a laugh. "But you did work those brutes well. At one time I didn't know how we were going to get out of it."

"To tell you the truth," answered the other, "no more did I. It was a deuced lucky thing that those Dutchmen came on the scene when they did."

Violet found herself merging into an entirely new vein of thought, and the subject of the vein spelt Averno. His way of handling the recent situation had appealed to her all round, and doing so, there came back to her mind the banter she and her father

had been exchanging that morning. "Why, he's quite an old fogey," she had said. Well, there hadn't been much "old fogey" about him in the recent incident, at any rate. She had already begun to think he might be interesting. Now she had come to the conclusion that he was very much so indeed.

CHAPTER XXIV

OF THE WEIRD AND WONDERFUL

UP the winding road, which led to Dead Man's Kloof, Averno was swiftly walking. It was night, and the road, a mere dusty riband between great slopes of sombre bush, looked vague and indistinct; even his own footsteps sounded loud and ghostly in the stillness, seeming to duplicate themselves, as here and there some large rock, abutting on the road, threw back a hollow echo. Now and again a stealthy rustle in the thick scrub betokened the presence of some wild creature, or the weird cry of a night-bird would float dismally from afar, but otherwise the silence was unbroken. Even the monotonous chirrup of the tree-frog, or the wailing whistle of the ever-present plover, would have been welcome. Here and there, rooted in some great boulder, the spiky forms of straggling aloes loomed forth in relief, unduly magnified in the moonlight into ungainly monsters, demoniacal and menacing in aspect; or the straight stems of a row of euphorbia grinned lividly, like teeth, from their background

of blackness. While upon the dead, still air came ever and anon a hoarse, low rumble.

It will be remembered, that Averno had resolved upon making a private investigation of the ruin in Dead Man's Kloof. This he had postponed for no reason in particular—except that he was Averno. But to-night it had occurred to him all of a sudden, even after they had all gone to bed, that he would make the promised investigation then and there; again because he was—Averno. It seemed absurd, didn't it, to turn out after one had once turned in, to go and perform such an act of tomfoolery as this? Nevertheless he did it. He got into his clothes, and slipped noiselessly out of the window, so as not to disturb the house and provoke comment, and was covering the road in fast strides, heading for Dead Man's Kloof.

No man living was more conveniently blessed with such complete absence of nerves, in the "jumpy" sense, that is, than this one. Yet to-night there was something so depressing in the utter solitude of the surroundings, in the dead brooding weight of the atmosphere, that affected even him. It might have been the foreshadowing of the heavy storm that was working up in front, or it might have been anything you like. He stopped, and looked at the inky pile in the heavens, lit up by vivid flashes, at the moon, in its third quarter, already sicklied over by the foreflung streamers of the advancing thunder mass, and thought he had been an idiot to come, to-night

at any rate. Why not go back? No, he might as well go through with it. Besides, he had now arrived at the entrance of the ill-omened kloof.

He struck into its rough, and grass-grown track The open doorway and the windows gaped at him drearily in what light there was left. At that moment would it be believed that this hard, intrepid, sceptical man felt a most unaccountable reluctance to advance another step in the direction in which he had set his face. But just then a splash of large raindrops on the sprays of the bush around, decided him. He pushed in the half-open door, and entered.

Not a moment too soon, for hardly was he inside than the storm broke. The heavy rumble of the thunder had turned to sharp staccato cracks; so stunning, so deafening, in their appalling loudness, as to shake the rickety tenement to its foundations, and to beget in the listener's mind a sensation of confused and awed bewilderment. The whole atmosphere was one sheet of blinding flame. Hardly a fraction of a second seemed to intervene between each steely flash, and in the unbroken roar and crash of the thunder it was as if the very heavens were about to roll up in a scroll. Then in a hurricane rush the rain came down; and, lit up by the vivid electric stream, more dazzling than the brightest glow of noonday, the whole space in front of the open doorway was as a heaving, dancing sea. At length there came a lull. The lightning was hardly less vivid, but it flashed at longer intervals, and the

hoarse booming of the thunder reverberated among the *krantzes*. The rain now fell in a soft regular downpour, and the rotten thatch was leaking like a sieve. In the dazzling gleam of the lightning, Averno again took in every detail of the room; the worm-eaten beams; the nails, rusty and crooked, half falling from the sometime whitewashed walls; the long cobwebs trailing in festoons ragged and grey, from the thatch; the blackened fireplace half filled with fallen bricks. An old cooking-pot, demoralized and rusty, one of its three legs broken off, lay on the hearth, otherwise no other article of domestic use.

And now, as the wild raving of the storm gave way to silence and blackness, intensified a hundredfold by the previous strife of the elements, some measure of the weird associations of the place began to obtrude itself upon Averno's mind. Strong-nerved, hard-headed as he was, the influences of the gruesome tradition, combined with darkness and the utter solitude, were bound to have their effect even upon him. It was one thing to be sceptical in the broad daylight, while discussing the pros and cons in a cheerful circle of his kind, it was quite another to find his scepticism unexpectedly put to the test, alone and with the dark, dead hours of the whole night before him. And then, although he had breathed no word of it to living soul, he was conscious in his heart of hearts that even his would-be scepticism had been forced to acknowledge a weak point since

that extraordinary and inexplicable affair of the Hottentot road labourer scared into lunacy. True, the fellow was only an Hottentot, than which no more childishly superstitious a being exists; still, the result remained.

There was something in the influence of this place which brought back to Averno the influences he had been conscious of, on that occasion when he had been so strangely moved to make that perfectly inconsequent visit to the tarred shed on his place at home. Deep down in his heart of hearts he had always suspected that he was endowed with a certain amount of psychic vein. More than once, in his nocturnal vigils and wanderings through his own fields and woods with the object of observing the night side of animal nature, as we heard him mention to Eva Passinghame, he had been conscious of vague presences—influences—in the dead hush of the small hours, and in his solitary life such had taken hold on him to a certain extent, though he would not have mentioned the fact for the world. Now here, the same sort of influence seemed gradually to be permeating the place, and the influence was an evil one. But what the devil had he come there for, he asked himself?

He filled his pipe, and taking out a matchbox, struck a light. The crack of the wax vesta igniting was like the report of a pistol in the deathly stillness. The best tonic for nerves is action, accordingly with pipe in full blast, he strolled forth, thinking

he might as well start some of his investigation outside.

It was still raining softly. The lightning, now distant, played at intervals with a sickly and feeble glare. At the back of the house, a considerable acreage of prickly pear—sure harbourage for snakes and other vermin—straggled nearly on to the roof. There was nothing to be discovered that way, and yet, and yet, whence did the man whom he and Enscombe found dead there, get that mysterious death wound?

He re-entered the house. The plash of drops from the leaky roof sounded loud and ghostly, varied every now and then by the ticking rustle of a tarantula, on the torn and tattered canvas ceiling. The atmosphere, cooled by the storm, was chilly. There were no means of making a fire, and this set Averno wondering again what the devil he had come here for, and why shouldn't he clear out and go home.

He opened his matchbox, and struck another vesta, and again looked around. The sudden flaming light illumined the dank, gloomy recesses of the room. The trailing cobwebs, swaying from the tattered canvas ceiling with its gaping holes, seemed like creeping ghostly hands, and the old cooking-pot, lying on the hearth, took the semblance of a great black head. Then the light went out, leaving him once again in darkness.

He thought he would go outside again. The

moonlight streamed in through the door which he had left open—why he had left it open, he hardly cared to own even to himself; had he done so in all candour, he would have been obliged to own that he didn't care to be *shut up* in the place. Just as he gained the door, a curious flash darted past him from above. It almost grazed his shoulder, and the ground at his feet seemed disturbed, but with the same swiftness as it had fallen, it flashed up again and disappeared.

Averno started back instinctively, and felt that in so doing he had saved his life, for the present at any rate. He recalled the curious impression that the last victim of this fateful place had made upon him. The mysterious wound in the left shoulder, *from above.* And he had just escaped receiving a similar one, probably with like result, and the sensation was not pleasant, in that at any moment the incident might be repeated. Yet now, every nerve within him thrilled. Here was something to go upon, something tangible. He had come to investigate, and so far had only given way to the workings of a too vivid imagination. Well, he would go outside and look into this. It was evident that by the doorway the peril, whatever it was, was centred. The dead man they had found had been lying half in, half out of the doorway.

But as he gained the doorway with this intent, down shot that flash again, swift, lightning like; and again disturbing the ground at his feet; nearer this

time, so that but for his quick and instinctive agility he would have been transfixed even as had been the other. Now he was standing out in the moonlight. He had drawn his revolver—he had not been such a fool as to come unarmed—and was keenly scanning the thatch overhead, but there was nothing and nobody. "What did it mean?" he said to himself. "What the devil did it mean?" He held the weapon ready. Still no sign of life. Quickly he went round to the back of the house to where the clump of prickly pears overhung. On that side of the thatch nothing and nobody. Whatever had been darted down upon him could not have come from within, for the canvas ceiling was all gaping there, besides, the parts that weren't were too rotten to have held any semblance of a human being. Yet this thing was material. It could by no possibility be an optical delusion, in view of the very material death of the man they had found there before. He would make sure anyway, he resolved grimly; and with this intent he stood in the doorway and quickly fired three shots overhead to the middle, right and left of the spot whence this astonishing weapon had descended. Result—*nil.*

"Well!" he said to himself, "I seem to escape what did for that poor devil, and I believe I'll go home. This is an odd business whichever way you look at it—a devilish odd business. Wait, I'll have another look round first."

Would he? He did the first, and found nothing.

But when it came to the last, why—what was this. What direful influence was it that had come upon him holding him bound, pervading the whole place? And it conjured up the spectacle of the miserable idiot mowing and gibbering in the corner, and hiding his head from some unseen and unutterable terror; and with this spectacle there came upon Averno's mind, a sense that the influence of some unseen, some unutterable terror was beginning to hold *him*. The whole atmosphere seemed charged with "influences" all evil—deadly. By a mighty effort of will, he reached the door, then stood as though turned to stone on the threshold. It seemed to matter nothing that he was standing on the spot on which that swift, mysterious deathstroke descended before. He was powerless to advance a step for good or for ill. And then—there before him barely three yards off, stood a Something and—it was a human form, but a form almost headless, only a pair of champing jaws above the trunk. The moonlight was full upon it. This thing was real. It was no case of optical delusion. He shut his eyes for a moment. He reopened them. Great Heaven! It was still there, and that dreadful overwhelming "influence" held him standing there, too, powerless, overwhelmed. A cold perspiration rained from him at every pore. He felt his face growing cold too, pale, and then as those dreadful "influences" seemed to close around him as though to crush him, he summoned up the mightiest will power that he was capable of bringing

into play. It answered. The thrall that was upon him relaxed, then fell off, like the cut cords would from a bound man. There was nothing now to be seen. The air was clear again.

* * * * *

It was a heavenly morning. The sun had just shot up, and the red ironstone faces of the great *krantzes* were gleaming like burnished gold in the flooding glow of the new-born day. Small birds were twittering among the green sprays of the bush, and the mellow piping of spreuws echoed from rock to rock.

"Hullo, old chap," sung out Enscombe, who was superintending milking and other operations in the kraals. "Been doing an early stroll?"

"Oh, yes," answered Averno. "That's just what I have been doing. Ripping morning after the storm, isn't it?"

Enscombe raised his head quickly, and looked at the speaker.

"Hullo, what's the row, old chap? You do look off colour. Look as if you had seen a ghost. Had a bad night or what?"

"Oh, I couldn't sleep very well. Rather restless, you know."

If Enscombe felt puzzled he did not say so, but he certainly did so feel. For sleeplessness was the very last thing in the world he had ever known to afflict Averno, and of course neither he nor anybody

else had the faintest inkling that the latter had spent the night anywhere but in his own bed. But one phrase of the other's remark struck him as grim irony. "Look as if you had seen a ghost."

CHAPTER XXV

OF MORE TALK

THERE are various faults, failings, vices, curses, innate in poor human nature, as every fool knows. The average moralist is prone to declare unhesitatingly, that the greatest of these is Drink. But it is not, it is Temper. We dare swear that more mischief is wrought, more peace is wrecked, more widespread evil brought about, by this curse, this infirmity if you will, than by the commonly decried, though true evil of drink. How truly the classic bard, we forget which, spoke, when he wrote "Anger is a short madness." Only it isn't, all too frequently—isn't a short one, that is.

Eva Passinghame was destined to learn something of this. It was all very well for her to bluff it off to Hermione as we heard her do, that she was not going to be under the foot of any mere man, but two fallacies underlaid the said bluff. One, that she had had a growing admiration for this mere man, the other, that since he had withdrawn, and, as she subsequently learnt, to the other ends of the earth,

it came home very uncomfortably to her, that that fact made a very great difference indeed. And this all owing to a gust of temper.

The admiration had been evoked very much by his downright, straight from the shoulder way, which corresponded very much to her own; wherein she forgot the ancient saw, that "Two of a trade don't agree." Even that episode in the clerestory of Burbleton Cathedral had appealed to her, by its sheer downrightness. The man knew his own mind at any rate, and knowing it hadn't hesitated to speak it. Here had been no speech making, no protestation. It was like on that former occasion, on the day after her arrival at his house as an accidental guest, when he had said, "Come along, then," and she came. Well, but he had no right to take her to task for a thing she couldn't exactly help. Yes, but—couldn't she?

She might have been more tactful on that occasion, she now told herself, she had more than once so told herself since, more soothing, more considerate. Hermione, in her place, would have been. But she had lost her temper with him, which with a man of Averno's temperament was fatal, and so it had exactly proved.

There you are. Temper again!

In her way, Eva had been fond of him, very fond of him, for the reason given above, and also for others. Apart from the physical side, and the hard, strong traits of the mental side, there was an underlying

sympathetic vein about him which had appealed to her greatly. She recalled her accidental—but so pleasant to look back upon—stay at Beverstoft, and the times they had spent together. They had discussed every subject under heaven, and she decided that she had never before run into any one half so interesting in his own downright quaint way. She was sympathetic with his intense love for, and interest in everything to do with the country life, the sights and sounds around his home. He had infected her with them, to the extent that when she returned to Comptonswick, stuccodom had hit her as more drab and dreary than ever. In her heart of hearts she fully realized to herself that she had been as Hermione had declared—a fool, and all because she could not restrain her temper. Yet there was nothing of the lovesick languish about Eva Passingham. Whatever she felt she kept to herself, but she did feel for all that, and deeply, curiously enough the more so, as time went on. Averno had been some months away, might be away for any time indefinitely, not on her account she knew, he was too hard for that, and then the thought of that very hardness would evoke a corresponding hardness in herself. Why could he not be like other men? He was not the first who had appreciated herself and her attractions, but he *was* the first whose self and whose attractions she had appreciated, and therein lay the secret of her all too late regrets.

But life was not made for puling over such,

She threw herself with renewed ardour into its more serious pursuits, which to her spelt—The Cause.

Even there the recollection of him would be forced upon her. She and the intrepid Aunt Caroline had put themselves into like positions since, and had more than once brought themselves into measurable distance of rough handling, though not on so near a scale as on that former occasion. And then the recollection of Philip Averno's quick promptitude and masterly skill would bring back—Philip Averno. But on such an occasion, the police, and the police alone, had sufficed to extricate them from their difficulties.

"I'm uneasy about Eva, Hermione," said Dr. Passinghame, coming in to where his eldest daughter was sitting reading Greek. "She's not herself, any fool could see that."

"Perhaps he could," answered Hermione, looking up with rather a mischievous smile. "But—let her work it off, that's the only thing."

The vicar sank into an armchair.

"Do you think she's still—er—thinking about Averno?"

Hermione's smile deepened.

"Well," she said, slowly, provokingly, "we feminines don't give each other away."

The vicar exploded.

"Not even to your own fathers, I suppose. Well, well, I've always held that 'you feminines' are

different animals altogether. There's no passing you by our standards."

"If Eva were here," said Hermione, still more sweetly, "how she would go for you."

"I know, I know," was the somewhat testy reply. "The fifth commandment has become a dead letter in these days with the rising generation. It isn't 'children, obey your parents,' it's 'parents, obey your children.'"

"Now, now, old chap, keep your hair on, as the saying goes. Do I ever want you to obey me?"

"You? No, no," answered her father, his tone softening. "But—well, well, never mind. It's a strange thing," he went on, "how Eva never seems to have gone down with the young people—male—around here. I suppose it's that temper of hers. Wants them to lie down, and let her do a clog-dance on them. Well, the healthy male doesn't care for that sort of thing. He'd be a fool if he did."

"But as it happens," answered Hermione sweetly, "she does go down exceedingly well with them."

"Pho!" snapped her father. "Yes, a set of counter-jumpers, or very little removed, that she meets at that tinpot tennis club, no one else."

"But there is no one else," urged Hermione, cogently enough. "Half a loaf's better than no bread, as the copybook maxim has it."

She was really teasing her father, for as it happened, she shared his opinion on this particular point.

"Half a loaf!" snorted the vicar. "Pooh! That's on all fours with all these idiotic proverbs, more fallacy than proverb, like the early bird and the worm, and the rolling stone gathers no moss, and honesty is the best policy, and the rest of the twaddle. I'd rather have the no bread myself if I were her. And then when some one does come along, in every way skies above this pettifogging crowd we have around here, one of our own class in fact, what does she do but scrub him up all the wrong way, and send him off in a huff, from which he is not likely to recover. I call that idiocy, and not only idiocy, but selfish idiocy, utter want of consideration for other people's feelings—to wit, his."

"But you wouldn't have her make herself cheap, would you?"

Dr. Passinghame was in a particularly irritable and nervy mood, he got that way sometimes. "Make herself cheap!" he echoed testily. "Why, what on earth else does she do? She's always doing it."

"No, no. That's not fair," expostulated Hermione, "we've got to keep in with people immediately around us whatever they are. Why, you've urged it upon us yourself."

To remind anybody of what they have said—or have not said—themselves, is like telling anybody that they are in a bad temper, even if they are. It is not precisely the throwing of oil on troubled waters. In this case it was not.

"Oh, some of you women would talk a dog's hind

leg straight," was the testy answer. "You know what I mean, well enough. Here, dropping out of the clouds as it were, comes the chance of her life, and she's fool enough to throw it away; to throw it away with both hands," he repeated, with angry emphasis.

"But are you so eager to get rid of Eva?" said Hermione, still placidly.

"Oh, don't be idiotic," was the rejoinder. "It isn't a question of getting rid of, it's a question of a woman fulfilling her natural destiny in life, and where one woman fulfils it well, nine fulfil it deucedly badly; and Eva had the chance of being the one. Got it?"

"Oh, I think so."

"Here was a most extraordinary chapter of accidents," went on her father. "Those two women start off on one of their crack-brained undertakings, and it lands them both in a hole, and one of them in luck. Well, well; they say nothing happens but the unexpected, and in this case it most certainly did; and then she takes the bit in her teeth, and spoils it all, wherein comes in again the unexpected."

"Upon my word, old father," rejoined Hermione. "If you are not the very embodiment of a disappointed matchmaker, there never was such a thing."

"Disappointed matchmaker? Bosh! Here was a man in every way, as the old cant word defines it, 'eligible'; worldly prospects eminently satisfactory, the man himself ditto."

Here Hermione cut in, her face dimpling with sly fun.

"But he is rather unorthodox, father, why he told us so himself."

"Oh, keep that for your Aunt Caroline," was the testy rejoinder. "I know a man for a man when I see him, and if he is a *man*, he can't be very far out." By which it will be seen that the vicar of Comptonswick, Doctor of Divinity, and who followed the Roman Rite in his ministrations, was a whole-souled Englishman, with no grain of bigotry in his composition.

"It certainly was passing strange," said Hermione, musingly, and with a twinkle of mirth in her eyes. "It almost looks as if 'Votes for Women' had a redeeming side after all, in that it was mainly instrumental in bringing about that very 'luck'."

"Votes for Satan," snapped the vicar. Then, relapsing into his dry humorous vein: "But it seems as if one particular aspirant for such vote hasn't got the sense to appreciate the redeeming side to which you refer. Well, here she is, so I suppose we'd better shut up."

The handle of the hall door was heard to turn, and in a moment Eva entered the room.

"Well, old father. What were you two talking about?" flinging herself into a deep chair.

"You," was the answer, bluntly.

"Well, and what about me?"

"Oh, your misdoings generally."

"Now, don't tease, which of them in particular?"

The vicar didn't answer. He filled his pipe deliberately, and lit it.

"A statesman never answers questions," he said. "You'd better ask Hermione. Being a woman, she can't be a statesman."

"No, not yet. But that'll come. And I'm a bit sick of that old rag," replied Eva, somewhat shortly.

"I tell you what it is, my child," went on her father. "Looking at you now in the light, it's my private opinion that you are beginning to 'go off.' Well, you know, all this frenzied work-up-to-the-pitch business is likely to produce that effect, so look out."

Eva did not know whether to enter into the humour of the thing, or feel angry. Hermione, the placid, bent over her book again, and seemed puzzling over a passage in Sophocles.

There might have been something in what her father had so bluntly, though good-humouredly stated. Eva was certainly not looking as she had looked when we first made her acquaintance; she had lost much of her colouring, and there was a restless, fitful manner about her, which had certainly not been there at that time. Now she got up.

"Oh, well, I'm going to bed," she announced shortly. "Good-night, all," and she went out.

"I'm not so sure," said Dr. Passinghame to his other daughter, "that the little matter we were discussing, might not have had its other side too."

"Well?" said Hermione.

"Well—only that two people, each with a strong will and a fair share of temper, would hardly have mapped out an entirely even way of looking at life together. No, I'm not."

To this, Hermione answered nothing. It was quite possible that she shared her father's opinion on that point.

CHAPTER XXVI

"TAKE CARE, VIOLET"

"IT strikes me, Malpas," said Enscombe's wife, "that your friend and Violet are getting a bit thick."

Enscombe stared, then shouted.

"Good Lord, Marian," he answered, when he had recovered from the laughter into which her remark had thrown him. "What sort of mare's nest have you discovered now? Why, jolly old Averno must be about my time of life within a year or two."

"That's nothing to do with it," answered the other, who, like many stupid women, now and then managed to hit the right nail hard on the head, while those less afflicted entirely missed it.

"Nothing to do with it? I like that. Averno and Violet! Ha, ha, ha."

"Well, it's done every day. You think yourself mighty smart, but you're not. We women see into things that you'd blunder over. It's all very well to guffaw, but I can tell you I've noticed what I say, if you haven't." Here again, a naturally stupid

woman talked sense, while an anything but stupid man laughed at it.

"They are always together," she went on. "While you're about on your own affairs Mr. Averno isn't with you, is he? No, and why? Violet takes good care of that. She wants him with her, and she gets him. Doesn't she?" Again Enscombe stared.

"Well, you are a record for finding mares' nests, Marian. Apart from any consideration of their repective ages, Averno was never a woman's man in any sense. When I was over in England, staying at his place—and a devilish good old sporting stay it was too—he never entertained any ladies except once or twice, and when I saw them I wondered that he did. But he said it was his duty, and looked it too. Averno a ladies' man? *Whau!* Oh, weren't we just jolly there, the pair of us! I had the time of my life. The shoot was perfect, why, you'd bag more pheasants and partridges on a couple of *morgen* in an hour, than you'd get anything at all on this whole bally farm in a week. And then, indoors, you did exactly what you liked, weren't even bothered to peel into other clothes for dinner when you were feeling beastly tired, as in two or three other places I stopped at for my sins, when I was over there. No, that was Liberty Hall, I can tell you. *Magtig!* I never enjoyed myself so much in my life. We used to sit over the fire of an evening in Averno's den, and yarn and swap sporting lies and smoke pipes, and the rest of it. And then

the best of the joke was, that one went to bed with the full and comforting knowledge that there was no necessity to be down in some room for prayers, when some one banged a silly gong. Then if you took the gun out for an hour or two there was no bother about forming up for parade at a rule of thumb time, and starting. Averno would just say, 'Shall we go and pick up a pheasant or two in such and such a covert. We needn't break our necks over regular beat. We'll take the under-keeper and hammer down two or three.' Well, that two or three would pan out to about twenty brace, and that in the course of a couple of hours or so. Or we'd stroll along round the mere—jolly place it was too, especially when the sunset made it red, and the things were flighting over like anything. We'd take a little spaniel, and get a good look in at snipe and duck. *Whau!* those were times!"

"Yes," said Mrs. Enscombe stonily, and to whom all this glowing reminiscence was so much prosy rigmarole, which is in keeping with the prophet having no honour in his own country. "But I don't see what that has to do with what I was talking about."

"Well, it might have," said Enscombe, coming down out of reminiscence. "For if your observations were accurate—why not?"

"Why not?" she echoed, and the normal stupidity seemed to come upon her again. "Why? Why, because of what I said."

"Well, I don't see that that matters," rejoined Enscombe, "if it's true. As I have just been telling you, Averno's got a jolly good fixture in the old country, and in fact nothing could be better—if you haven't found a mare's nest, Marian."

"Well, I haven't. Just you keep your eyes open, and you'll see. There! Look at them now."

Enscombe did. Violet and Averno were coming up the path which led from the kloof below. They were some way off as yet. The girl was evidently laughing and chatting, and though they were too far off to hear voices, the sound of her clear laughter travelled to where they were. It was a bright morning. The sun, not long risen in a blue cloudless sky, was fast melting the diamond carpet that overspread the earth, likewise the diamond sprays which hung from the fronds of the bushes. Even still wreaths of white mist shut out the expanse beyond, giving promise of a glorious day.

"Well, I don't see anything in that," said Enscombe. "Why the dickens shouldn't they pal up together? I'm afraid, Marian, your fever-heated imagination has run away with you for once."

"Has it?" she answered, rather snuffily. "You think because they don't go about hugging each other, that what I say isn't true. Well, you'll see."

The pair were now quite close. Enscombe, without seeming to, scrutinized them keenly. Violet's face was all sparkling, lit-up animation; that of

Averno, on the other hand, was normal. Enscombe chuckled.

"I'm going to watch this," he said. "It would be a howling joke. Good old Averno, taking on that sort of thing at his time of life."

"I don't see any joke in it; I consider it rather a serious thing," was the stupid woman's answer, as she turned away.

Now the fact is, she was not far wrong, as to the result of her observations. As she had said, these two had got "very thick." Violet, by degrees, had found that her original feelings towards their guest, as we heard her express them to her father in the words, "He's quite an old fogey," had undergone a considerable change, and by this time she would have come to wonder how she could have so expressed them; that is to say, if she could remember ever having so expressed them at all, which probably she could not. To begin with, she had felt life to be a trifle lonely since she had come home. She had no companionship of her own age. Now and then they would take a ten mile drive to visit some neighbour, or the reverse would happen, but with those of her own age she did meet on such occasions she was not in sympathy, nor they with her, and the same held good of those of the opposite sex. Then this stranger had appeared upon the scene, totally different from all the rest of them. He was so companionable; so amusing with his dry originality, and didn't talk down to her, although he was a contemporary of her

own father's. He treated her entirely as a rational being, not as a newly emancipated schoolgirl, and this she very keenly appreciated. So it had gradually come about, that, possibly, in her capacity of newly emancipated schoolgirl, she was inclined to weave something of a romance, the centre of which was their guest. She saw in him attributes which appealed to her. That quick decisive way of his for one, a sort of taking up the reins when they were doing anything together, which coming from any one else would have set her back up at once, but which coming from this one did not. In fact in her heart of hearts she rather liked it. As her mother had said, the two had been a great deal thrown together, and on such occasions she would prattle away to him about her former doings and interests, light as feather down as they were, and the other would listen interestedly, never coming within measurable distance of seeming to snub her, as others so much older than herself might have done, and this she appreciated.

"I'm afraid I must bore you dreadfully at times, Mr. Averno," she had remarked, on one occasion. "You who have been about so much and seen so much, you listen to all my silly school pranks and nonsense as if it interested you."

"But it does interest me," he had answered.

"Does it?"

"Of course it does, or I shouldn't have been interested," smiling down into the violet eyes.

"What a kind face as well as a strong one," had thought the girl. Then aloud: "So I may continue to bore you, may I?"

"Certainly you may, only you don't," he had answered.

"Very well, I'll take you at your word," she had said joyously. And Averno, looking down into the bright, sparkling, winsome face, and noting the little touch of deference in the tone, which was insidiously flattering, had fallen to wondering somewhat bitterly whether this girl would have left him kicking up his heels for more than an hour after he had wired her that he was coming over a county and a half on purpose to see her. Yes, they were very much thrown together. They would range the kloofs and the great hollow together, in search of game, as we saw them on that first occasion, for Averno had long since got over that first prejudice of his against her in the rôle of "Diane chasseresse." Or they would stroll about lazily chatting in the radiant sunlight amid the full-voiced piping of birds flinging themselves from spray to spray; or they would sit on either side of a deep waterhole, where soft masses of maidenhair fern flowed in cascades down the dark moist rock, with rods and fishing tackle, pulling out a mighty basket of rock mullet and other things from the depths beneath, which afforded a variety on the form of sport usually prevailing.

Enscombe just then happened to be abnormally busy with his farming operations, so he had lightly

made over to her the task of entertaining his guest and old friend. This was no task at all to Violet, and if it ever had been, assuredly now it had become quite the reverse. Indeed when she went to bed at night, she could no longer conceal from herself that she did so, happy in the consciousness that the next day would bring a renewal of it.

Here, you see, were all the elements of potentiality. It is a curious thing too, that prabably about on the same day two sets of parents, say 6,000 miles apart, should have been discussing Averno in precisely the same connexion—Averno, whom we heard his friend and host jocosely declare, cared for women not one whit. But, that need not necessarily be taken to mean that women need not care about Averno.

CHAPTER XXVII

OF A TERROR

"SO you are going to leave us, I hear. What a shame!"

The girl's bright face clouded. She looked away from him over the sweep of bush-clad slope, where a shimmer of heat arose from the sun-warmed ground.

"Well, yes. 'The best of friends must part,' as the old chestnut hath it. I'm privileged to have certain interests on the other side that I can't let rip too long; at least so my apology for a conscience tells me. It isn't much of a conscience, but such as it is—well, there it is."

"I am sorry. I thought you were going to stop with us much longer."

"That's nice. It's satisfactory to go away from anywhere, and think that people are sorry. I'm sorry too. But, as I said before, that wretched conscience clause comes in."

Violet did not immediately answer. She was gazing out over the shaggy bush fastnesses of Dead Man's Kloof, and there was a wistfulness in the eyes,

in the face, that was partly turned away from him. How she would miss him, in their daily companionship; the jokes they had in common—and they had plenty; their wanderings about the veldt at all times and every time, with gun or without; the cheery evenings, with him and her father exchanging yarns and reminiscences at the genial fireside, for the evenings had drawn in chilly now, and a few blazing logs added materially to the comfort thereof; and his keen appreciation of the songs she would contribute to the enjoyment of the said evenings. And then there was more, and that was his way towards herself. As we have said, there was no "talking down" to the newly fledged schoolgirl; it was all talking even. The camaraderie was perfect; he talked to her in his ordinary dry way; as he might have been talking to anybody; and she, well the same held good of her, and she could not help to a certain extent feeling flattered that a man so much older than herself should take pleasure in making such a complete companion of her at all. And now he was going away.

Averno watched the half-averted face, and rather read up the situation; in fact he read it up very much as we have set it down.

"So you'll miss me, will you, little Violet?"

"Of course I will. Look what times we've had together," and again she turned her face away, and Averno thought to detect a catch in her voice.

"Well, now, look here, child, why shouldn't you all

come over and put in a time with me at Beverstoft. Your father told you no doubt—in fact I've heard him over and over again—what sort of gunning we've got there, only, mind you, ploughed fields and wet swedes are not this sort of thing I can tell you. Very different to this. They mean wet feet and hard labour."

"Ah, I don't see how that can come off," she answered wistfully. "I'm sure it couldn't be managed, but—how I should love it."

"Well, there's no telling," he answered. "It's a rum world, wherein most things that happen are the unexpected. I must have a talk with your father about it."

The two were out on one of their unorganized wanderings over the veldt; Averno had a gun, but Violet had not brought hers; she had had a touch of headache in the morning, and rather shied at the effect that even the imaginary concussion of shooting might have upon this; so she had left it at home. But she would not allow him to go alone; the days of his stay were drawing too close for that, and judging from her sentiments expressed above, those days were rather valuable to her.

The two were seated in the shade amid the bush on the slope of Dead Man's Kloof. It was the middle of the afternoon of one of those exhilarating cloudless days, which amid similar surroundings is a dream of delight in those parts. Just beneath them on the left, rose the thatch of that ill-

omened old ruin, even it in the joyous sunlight conveying little idea of the grim legend, and, of late, grim tragedies haunting its walls. How should it indeed, amid the golden and sunlit surroundings, the flashings of bright-winged spreuws from spray to spray, the twitter of small birds, the murmur of bees on the clear invigorating air, and the golden radiance which picked out the massed surface of greenery which flowed down to meet that on the other side, like a wave following a wave.

"I say, let's go down and look at that, shall we?" she said suddenly. "I've never been into it. I don't mind in broad sunshine like this and with you, though it's rather gruesome all these people having come to grief there. I say, though, do you believe it's haunted and all that?"

Averno thought of his experience, of which he had uttered no word to anybody, not even to Enscombe, and looked strangely, furtively, at the bright, eager face beside him.

"Oh, I think we won't," he said. "It isn't good for little girls to get morbid fancies into their little heads by going to look at 'haunted' places and all that sort of bosh. It only starts them dreaming at night, and shouting out, and waking everybody in the house."

"As if I should do that," answered Violet, with mock petulance. "You don't know me at all."

"Never mind. We don't want to go poking into tumble-down houses on an afternoon like this; we

are much jollier outside," and he filled and lighted a fresh pipe. The girl was lying at ease on the ground, her sun-kissed face upturned to the sky, the picture of ease. He, too, lounging there tranquilly blowing out blue clouds, was also the picture of ease.

Then a sound caused both of them to sit up quickly.

"Hullo," said Averno, in a low tone, quickly, eagerly, "I'd better go down and try to get a shot."

"Yes, do," said Violet. "You will if you're quick."

For the sound which had come to their ears was the grating cackle of guinea-fowl; a large troop, from its extended volume. Averno caught up his gun.

"Wait for me here," he said, and then plunged swiftly, and as noiselessly as he could, down into the bush.

The wild guinea-fowl is among the leeriest and most elusive of game birds. If he takes alarm he will rise and take wing for some point, anything up to a mile away; or he will not rise at all, but will simply run, which perhaps is worse, for his pace is that of a Natal cockroach, and as he runs silent the chances of finding him are not great. Now this particular troop did so run, and had it not been that Averno caught sight of two units of the same, darting across the overgrown track which bisected Dead Man's Kloof, he might as well have gone back to rejoin Violet, but he did, and therefore kept on, hotfoot, on the trail of the rest.

Right down into the kloof they led him; now he caught sight of a stray one running for dear life among the grass and bushes, but always out of shot. He ran too, but it was no good; whether they were within range or not, they wouldn't rise. He concluded to give it up, or he would have to follow them for quite a long distance, and then having come to this conclusion, as he halted previous to retracing his steps, there came to his ears a scream—the horrid, heartrending, feminine scream of one in real terror. He stopped dead. His blood seemed to freeze, and his temples hammered as he stood listening.

Violet, left alone, had not altered her attitude of ease, was lying there with her hands locked under the back of her head. She was listening for the shots which would tell her that Averno was taking toll of his quarry. But none came. She sat upright and listened, but could hear nothing. Then she did hear something, but not from the direction she expected, in fact quite close at hand, not ten yards off, and the "something" she heard was a hideous, bass-toned, snarling chuckle.

There above a low bush a dreadful object met her gaze—a head, and such a head. It was a black head of enormous size. Its protruding eyeballs were rolling, and there was a jabber of white teeth as the great simian jaws opened and shut with an audible clatter. Then the rest followed. A huge mon-

strous form rose into view, of such gigantic proportions indeed as to look scarcely human. This advanced towards her, the jaws mowing and slavering, a deep inarticulate growl proceeding from the monster's throat. The terrified girl lifted up her voice in a long, pealing scream.

Stood listening, but only for a fraction of a moment did Averno thus stand, and it needed not that second wild scream to hurry his steps. He was in hard, firm training and took his up-hill run over loose stones and through impeding bush at a fine pace, and then, and then—what was this?

He had gained the overgrown tract leading to the haunted ruin, when there sprang out into it, about a hundred yards ahead, an enormous black figure. Was it human, he thought, with something of a superstitious misgiving, by reason of the associations of the place? If it was, why then it was certainly by far the hugest specimen of humanity he had ever seen.

The monster had not seen him, and was running along the track with vast strides—and then indeed there came to Averno a whirlwind shock of amazement and horror.

This thing, whatever it was, was holding Violet in its loathly grip, in short was carrying her off somewhere. So gigantic was this monster that its vast proportions had at first concealed the form of the girl, which was not a slight one.

Averno put on sprint. The object of his pursuit seemed suddenly to become aware of his presence. A half look over the shoulder, a sort of coughing growl, and it redoubled its pace; even the pursuer, in hard training as he was, found himself being left behind. That would never do. At all costs he must keep this in sight. He could not shoot for fear of injuring Violet, besides the other was just out of shot-gun range. Then suddenly the object of his pursuit turned, headed straight for the haunted ruin, and disappeared therein.

So far that was a relief, in that he had cornered the enemy. He exchanged his No. 4 cartridges for buckshot ones, and hurrying on came to the place. Now wariness was essential. The recollection of that long, death-dealing instrument recurred to him; were it to transfix him, then Violet would be absolutely at the mercy of this monster. He could hear it growling within with the complacent growl of a dog that was worrying a bone. Heavens! what was going on in there, even already it might be ——?

Noiselessly he gained one of the windows that commanded the bulk of the interior, thanks to the sunshine outside he could see into this. He could see something else; this thing, whatever it was, whether human or vampire, supporting in front of him the form of the girl, who was now evidently in a dead faint, for her head hung limply forward. It had seen him too, for now it began to mouth and

gibber. It was a human being, Averno decided, but—what an abnormal one.

"Put her down," said Averno shortly, in the Xosa tongue. "At once, or I shoot." He thrust his gun muzzle through the gaping window and was pointing it at the monster's head, but with a dead chilling feeling of helplessness, for if he fired he would perhaps kill Violet as well. The monster seemed to know this, and grinned and gibbered. Then it held forward the limp figure of the girl in shield fashion, tauntingly. It was impossible to fire. Now, for the first time this dreadful thing broke into articulate human speech.

"Ha, I have seen *her*," it growled, "she who walks here at night and does this and this," and the speaker champed his jaws in such vivid imitation of the apparition seen there by Averno, that the latter actually felt some of the influence come upon him as that which he had felt then, but by a strong effort of will he repressed it. Meanwhile, he was keenly watching for a chance.

"I am the chief of *abatagati*,"[1] went on the horror. "At my word the thunder rolls, the shadowed dead come to earth again and walk at night even as *she* walked whom I have seen. I am the chief of all the *abatagati*, and she is the chieftainess, but I am black and she is white, wherefore she sends to me that she is lonely, she needs one that is white to go and bear her company, and lo—I have found that one.

[1] Practisers of witchcraft.

Now who will behold the red blood from this white round throat, which will be grateful to her who walks at night and bleeds."

Averno realized that it was now or never. The monster was holding Violet's unconscious form with one mighty arm. The other went now behind his back, where was a battered and broken mantelshelf. On this sounded an ominous rattle and a clinking noise.

Now Averno saw his chance—afterwards when he had time to, he wondered that he had not seen it before. By reason of Violet's stature in comparison, the feet and legs of the monster were exposed. Averno poured a charge of murderous buckshot into these, which, fired pointblank, had the effect of a bullet from an elephant gun. The huge bulk crashed to the ground bringing with it the form of the girl—fortunately on top. The great dull-bladed butcher knife still lay on the battered mantelshelf. To rush in and tear the form of Violet from the now slackening grip was the work of a second. Averno carried her some little distance and put her down under the shade of a bush. Then he went back to this veritable slaughter-house, or rather he didn't get further than the threshold, for the aspect of the felled giant was so formidable as he howled and writhed and tried to get at him that Averno came to the conclusion that it was best to leave him. It would have been more merciful to have dispatched him, but—the law.

He went out to where he had deposited Violet. What

a ghastly narrow thing that had been, he thought. It was but a matter of minutes, or he would have come up only to find her murdered; butchered in the most ghastly fashion. Further, had she been deprived of the power to utter those screams, another mysterious victim would have been added to this ghastly place—and such a victim. To his unutterable relief now, he found that she was beginning to come round.

"Where am I?" she asked. "Have I been dreaming?"

"That's just what you have been," he answered.

"Oh, yes. I remember. Oh, and it was a horrid dream. But somehow it doesn't look like where you left me."

"Yes, that's all right," he answered, blessing the forethought which made him move her some little way down, where the bush shut off all sight of the ruin. "Come along down this kloof now, and we'll take a round home. I think some of those guinea-fowl flew back. We may get one or two on the way."

CHAPTER XXVIII

AFTERWARDS

"I FANCY you'll be called upon to hold no more inquests on casual cockroaches who have come to grief in that infernal old haunted shack of yours, Enscombe," said Averno drily, as he put his friend in possession of the events of the afternoon. "That ghost, at any rate, is laid."

"Well, well," mused Enscombe, "well, well"; and he got up and strode up and down the floor in a state of unwonted agitation. "Great Heaven! Averno, you've saved my little girl, my one and only little girl. It's too awful to think of—what would have happened if it hadn't been for your quickness and nerve?"

"Then don't think of it," rejoined the other shortly, "only I suppose there'll have to be some rotten inquiry; meanwhile I think we'd better go up and see after the beast, although he'll be dead when we get there, that's certain. It would have been an act of Christian charity to have put a charge of buckshot into his vital organs and put him out of

pain, but then the sapient Law would have called that manslaughter, in that it was not done actually in self-defence or defence of anybody else, seeing that the creature was powerless to offend. Well, I suppose there'll be the devil of a hullabaloo raised about this, but it can't be helped," he added in a sort of resigned, disgusted tone. "And I wanted to start for home this day week."

"Well, you can't now, old chap, not just yet. You'll have to give evidence at the inquest and perhaps you may be arrested on a charge of manslaughter, but it will be only a matter of form. Bail and so forth. Van Reenen, the new R.M. at Gydisdorp, is all right; a sensible chap and won't put any bother in the way, that's certain. It's equally certain that even if he does commit you to the Circuit the Solicitor-General will decline to prosecute, and even if he didn't there's no jury on the Eastern Frontier that would convict in such a case. Well, let's go up and see into it anyhow."

Enscombe went to the door and shouted. Presently a yellow-skinned, malodorous Hottentot came up, leading two horses saddled and bridled. These they mounted.

The old ruin stood, the now declining sun almost mellowing its grim, diseased-looking face. They entered. Enscombe could not resist a strong qualm of disgust at the sight of this huge, hideous black form, like some gigantic ape. But, just as Averno had predicted, they were looking upon a dead thing.

"Now look at this," said Averno, designating the dull-coloured butcher knife on the worm-eaten mantelshelf. "Now you take in the situation?"

"Rather," answered Enscombe seriously.

He looked from the implement, which he did not touch, to the tremendous body lying upon the floor.

"*Magtig!* Averno, why this is simply a giant. But what does it all mean? He must have been a homicidal maniac."

"I should think so, very much so, and from what the beast let drop, I deduce that he was scared into lunacy by that apparition which tradition associates with this particularly attractive building of yours."

"Oh, bosh, old chap," said Enscombe. "You don't believe in any such piffle as that?"

"Perhaps not," answered the other. "But—you never can tell."

Enscombe looked at him curiously, and was about to remark, but didn't. Averno had always been an eccentric, he remembered, and now if he didn't know what to make of him, well—he didn't, but the hard fact remained, that he had rescued Violet from a most hideous and ghastly peril, and at that rate he was welcome to be as eccentric as he pleased.

"I tell you what it is, old chap," he went on. "I'll have this damn old place burnt to the ground."

"I shouldn't do that," answered Averno. "I should keep it as a picturesque ruin. For one thing you won't have any more people coming to grief here because we've now cleared up the mystery of all

that, and there it lies," with a nod towards the horrid black monstrous form. "It's simple as A.B.C. now and yet not. The darting down of the assegai spliced to the end of a long stick is simplicity itself. But where and how the devil it was wielded stumps me still, that's the 'not.'"

He did not care even then to give away to Enscombe that he had spent a night in the place, and the experiences he had undergone there. He didn't know why, but there it was.

"Well, we shall have a nice lot of bother over this," said Enscombe disgustedly. "But I hope, as you say, that there will be no more of these tragic happenings; for I'm getting more than a little fed up with them. Well, we'll send round to Hastley tomorrow and we'll come along and hold the inquest, and then, well—I don't know what," he added in an intensely disgusted tone.

Even as Enscombe had said, they had a good deal of bother over the matter. His farm lay in a remote mountain corner of the district of Gydisdorp, yet somehow or other the affair managed to get into the papers. Averno had to undergo a preliminary examination before the Resident Magistrate, but that official justified the opinion we heard Enscombe express regarding him, and opined that there was not sufficient in the case to send it for trial and dismissed it. Which decision was greeted by applause in court, which was *not* suppressed.

The strange part of it was that no evidence whatever was forthcoming as to the identity of the slain Kafir. Nobody seemed to know anything about him, native or white. Yet his huge personality, it would have been thought, should have marked him out as conspicuous among either or both. How did he live, and where did he live? both asked themselves. For the first the mystery of missing sheep or goats from the flocks of neighbouring stock farmers of late seemed now solved. For the second the crags and caves overhanging Dead Man's Kloof would afford ample and intricate shelter to leopards and baboons, why not to this human savage animal? Well, at any rate it was a good riddance, decided the owners of the said flocks, and voted Averno a public benefactor.

It may or may not have been strange, how easily Violet had got over her alarming experience—how really alarming she herself did not know. There was no collapse as result of shock supervening. She had given her evidence in court in a straightforward, self-possessed way—for subsequently, of course, when there was no fear of the shock having a harmful effect, she had been put in possession of all that had happened—and then seemed to have dismissed the matter from her mind. So completely indeed had she done so as to set her father and her father's friend both wondering. But as, according to the proverb, "One nail drives out another," so now in

her case the one nail was the impending departure of her said father's friend. This had been delayed owing to the inquiry, for which she was thankful. Poor child!

Then one morning early, a Cape cart was brought round, and while Averno's luggage was secured behind it with knotted *reims* all were on the stoep for a last farewell.

"Awfully sorry, old chap," Enscombe was saying, "that I can't drive you into Gydisdorp at any rate, to see you off that far"—Glydisdorp being forty-one miles distant—"you especially, of all people," he added, at which implied reference Averno looked impatient. "But you know, if any one does, that one can't take two days off in the thick of shearing time, which is what it would mean if I went."

"Oh, of course. That's all right. I know about that. Well, good-bye and think over what I said, about coming to Beverstoft. I meant it, mind."

"I know you did. Well, good-bye, old chap, good-bye."

"Good-bye, little Violet." He took the girl's two hands in his. What was this? Her eyes, full upon his, were not clear as normally. They were dim. He didn't like that. It was bad enough to a lonely man this exchanging of farewells, but when it came to something very much like tears on the part of one of those to whom he was bidding farewell, why it was disquieting. He turned away quickly, got into the Cape cart and was gone.

What a world it is of meetings and partings, mostly partings, for is not the said world mostly set to a minor key? There are some who say—many who say—that the world is what you make it. Idiots all. For instance, what had poor little Violet Enscombe to do with the making of any world when half an hour later her father, his attention arrested by a very unwonted sound proceeding from her room, entered, and found her sobbing in the most heart-breaking manner.

"Little one, what is it?" he said, with a choke in his own throat at the sight of her grief.

"Oh, nothing. Nothing," she answered, flinging back her head with a laugh, which he did not at all like. "I'm only a fool, that's all," and again she laughed—in a way which he did not at all like.

CHAPTER XXIX

HOME AGAIN

IT was good to be at home again; good to look upon the rich fresh leafage of mid-June; good to hear the melodious call of the cuckoo, though now taking on its third note, sure sign of impending departure from our midst; good to hear the voices of thrush and robin and innumerable warblers pouring forth melody as the sun drooped; good to see the brown and white flash of scuttling rabbits among the great feathery masses of vivid green bracken; good to delight the eye with many a sweep of hay grass splashed golden with buttercups and ready for the scythe—or rather the up-to-date mowing machine. In short the whole world was good, to one who owned such a beauty spot as this upon its surface. And yet, and yet—there is always a something. Philip Averno who owned this particular beauty spot realized that there was a something, and that "something" was that he felt himself intensely alone.

Well, he had been that during the last few years

of his life, here, at Beverstoft, and had been very fairly content under such conditions, but now somehow things seemed to have changed. During his stay with his old friend on the latter's South African farm, he had certainly not felt lonely. Now that he was home again he did to an extent that he had never felt before. On board the liner, too, which had brought him home, there had been too much bustle and stir and sociability for any one to feel lonely.

Or was it only a sense of general loneliness that was upon him, or was it that something definite was lacking. For now, on his return, certain associations rose up and hit him as it were. He thought he had disposed of all that, had put it all behind him, but—had he? Even Stirrup, the little Clumber, lying on the lawn at his feet under the great horse chestnut, contributed towards these associations. He looked back somewhat wistfully to the jolly old life at Enscombe's and the day-in day-out expeditions with Violet; and then a whimsical sort of mood came upon him. What if he had offered to transplant Violet hither? How she would have revelled amid these surroundings, and the paradise with the gun and rod which such would have afforded her. Then he laughed at himself sardonically. What ridiculous nonsense, he told himself. Why, she was a child. Hadn't he overheard her define him as quite an old fogey. Why, she would simply have laughed in his face as at one who was making a fool of himself, or worse still—in the alternative

would it have been merely the attractions and advantages he could have given her that would have constituted the effective bait? Yet, another had not been so attracted. Such had not seemed to count with her.

Lounging there in his wicker deck chair he was making a mistake as hard as he could make it, and the mistake was this. Instead of thinking, he ought to have been reading; reading something light and jolly and take-him-out-of-himself kind of thing, instead of which here he was indulging in introspect, and introspect of the reverse of a cheering nature. This wouldn't do. He would get out the car or a bicycle and go and look up some of his neighbours. But the idea was evolved only to be dismissed. He didn't want to see any one. The women would bore him with all sorts of idiotic questions, such as how many lions he had shot before breakfast out in Africa, while the males would be all away somewhere knocking a silly white ball about a field. That was no catch. They were all bores. Just then Stirrup lifted up his head and growled, while voices from round the angle of the house seemed to tell of the arrival of some one.

Averno felt disgusted. He didn't want to see any one just then. Looking up he saw the doctor advancing across the lawn.

"Hullo, Knight," he sung out, jumping up; for this one constituted an exception. "Glad to see you, old chap. Here, drop down there," showing the

other into his chair, "while I howl out to them to fetch us another chair and something else."

"Well, you are a nice one, Averno," said the other. "To slide away like that without letting a soul know where you had gone or even that you were going. And now if not making too bold might I venture to ask where the devil you *have* been?"

"Certainly you may. I've been out to see Enscombe. Had a jolly time with him too."

"Great Scott! Enscombe!" answered the other, astonished. "Did you now? Yes, when he went away from here he wanted us all to go out with him there and then, and stop with him on his sheep and cattle run."

"It's ostrich," corrected Averno.

"Oh, well, it doesn't much matter. And so you had a time of it?"

"Rather. I came in for one or two outside experiences, as to which I may or may not tell you some day. I don't feel in the least inclined to now. Here, fill up."

"I don't mind, as I'm off duty," answered Knight. "There's nothing pressing on just now, so I thought I'd just wheel round and see how you were getting along. Couldn't yesterday because there was something pressing. Man, but you're looking fit. Why, you must have been baked these last few months by the look of you now. I wonder you didn't stick out there longer."

"I was wondering just about the same thing when you rolled up. Well, what's the news?"

"Oh, not any, as usual." All the same there was, but the doctor was wondering whether he should impart it just then, and came to the conclusion that he wouldn't: only he thought it was a pity that Averno should have returned just at that juncture. So they sat on and talked, about this and about that, of the happenings, mostly of an everyday nature in and around the village of Amory Furzeham, but mostly about Enscombe and his surroundings.

"Fancy Enscombe having such a devilish pretty daughter," said Knight, interested in the other's description of that young person. "By Jove, Averno, it's uncanny, in that it foists upon us how we are all getting on. Why, weren't the three of us at St. Kirwin's together? Well then—there you are." This remark coming on top of his former reflections rather jarred upon Averno. However, he only said—

"Well, I suppose we are. Let's stroll around a bit. You'll stay to dinner, of course?"

"Thanks I can't, can't even stroll, could only break away for a couple of hours—and now," looking at his watch, "they're gone. I must follow their example and be gone too."

Left alone Averno felt that feeling of loneliness deepen over him again to a strange and weirdly unwonted degree. He got up and strolled back to

the garden door of the house. A pergola along the front walk simply bled rich crimson roses, and tall white lilies reared up in creamy patterns between this and the front windows. Bees hummed in the June warmth, and the pale yellow of a brimstone butterfly fluttered in contrast to the gorgeous vestures of the red admiral and peacock and tortoiseshell. Other flowers of innumerable variety glowed in the beds—did it all make a frame, for which the central figure of the picture was wanting?

It was curious how since his return these latter associations which had been brought into his beautiful home should so crowd upon him again. He had not gone away to escape from them, but simply because he thought he might as well have a congenial change, and, strange to say, before he had gone away, these recollections had been nothing like so acute. While away they had been less so still; but now—well it was unaccountable.

He selected a stick from a stand in the passage, and just then the front door bell rang. Quickly he gained a window which commanded a view of the intending visitor. It was the rector of the parish, an excellent man, but a shocking bore, in fact the very antithesis of Dr. Passinghame. With all his habitual considerateness Averno felt that he simply could not do with a bore just then.

"Say I'm out, Lily," he whispered, intercepting the maid in the hall on her way to the front door, and the girl smiled and went on, while he slipped

into his den. He would send a subscription to something in reparation for this social lie, but, at present, in his then vein—no.

The coast clear he went out. Automatically he took his way down to the wood, through which the winding path led to the mere. The coo-coo of cushats made soft amorous melody up there in the dense leafage and—why here was the very spot on which he had sighted Eva on the morning after her arrival. This was stupid; why on earth should he bother about that now? Yet somehow that vision of the girl with the oval face and lustrous eyes and the soft fleece of white scarf lying upon the dark profusion of her hair, and the erect elasticity of her gait and poise, came back to him now, so vivid and real that he almost had to rub his eyes to make sure he wasn't dreaming. Psychic people would say that he had materialized a duplicate presence, but that was bosh. Yet, was it bosh? He had seen that, had felt that, since last he had walked along this very path, which had shaken his scepticism not a little. At that moment he realized what was almost a certainty, that they might be right. He continued his stroll, Stirrup running now beside him, now in front, now to heel, but never venturing so much as to dream of breaking away after any runaway rabbit; he was a dog with far too much self-respect to indulge in the dissipation of the common or roadside cur.

Averno looked around the woods he loved so well; his own woods, in all their fresh glorious June

greenery. There was a gap in the tree tops, showing a patch of vivid blue sky. Against this an arrow-like shape darted, in arrow-like flight, then back again. It was a sparrow-hawk, anathema to all keepers and to most game preservers. This one of the latter, however, watched the predatory little hawk with interest, for as we have said he would not allow the shooting of such, and his main regret now was that he could not follow its movements by reason of the thickness of the foliage. He stood still for a time trying to, and then gave it up and strolled on to the keeper's lodge.

How delightfully English and homelike that picturesque gabled cottage looked, festooned with rose creepers, against its background of tossing leafage standing on the edge of the covert. The meadow in front was studded with rearing-pens.

"Well, Eccles," said Averno, joining the keeper who was busy upon these. "It seems good to be home again."

"I don't doubt you must have seen some strange sights in them furrin' parts, sir."

"One or two, Eccles. Yes, one or two," repeated Averno, with a dry smile lurking about the corners of his mouth, as he figured the wild amazement which would come into that faithful retainer's face, did he narrate to him the said "one or two" of the strangest.

"They blacks be middlin' murderers, sir, bean't they? Least so I've heard tell."

"Oh, they can be a nuisance at times, yes"; and then he went on to talk about things nearer home; the prospects of rearing and the general outlook for the next season; then Eccles looked doubtful and began rather diffidently to say his say. This was to the effect that the predatory birds, and even the squirrels, were growing far too numerous and wanted keeping down; only keeping down, he emphasized.

"No, no, Eccles, I won't have that. They get ruthlessly murdered on all the places around, and if they do find sanctuary here, well, I don't care; and I haven't noticed that for its size our place shows off any worse in the game book at the end of the season notwithstanding."

The keeper looked dubious. He was not altogether inclined to agree, but after all he had heard the old adage, "he who pays the piper has a right to call the tune," so pretended to.

Averno resumed his walk. He struck into the side path again which led from the keeper's cottage to the one which went down to the mere. But when he came into the main path, a disinclination came over him to pursue his walk any further. He would go back to the house again.

But just before he came to the point where the path opened on to the meadow, Stirrup, the little Clumber, stood still, cocked his ears, then ran forward, whining. This seemed strange, but Averno did not give it a thought. He strolled leisurely on.

The cavern of leafage opened into dazzling sunlight, and then, and then—— There in the meadow path, where he had beheld her on that morning, stood Eva Passinghame.

CHAPTER XXX

"WORDS OF POWER"

IT was hard to say which of the two was most astounded. Both seemed unable to utter a word. Both could only stare. Through his mind only flashed the thought—— Had he actually materialized a duplicate presence? He passed a hand rapidly over his eyes, more than half expecting, when he removed it, to find that presence gone.

But it had not gone. On the contrary, there it stood, with half a smile playing on the face, the owner of which broke the silence.

"You?" she said. "Why, I thought you were away in Africa."

"Came home day before yesterday. Don't know I hadn't better have stayed out there for a bit longer, at any rate." This quickly, gustily. Thus did these two meet. No reference to the past, either by word or tone, not even by look. Yet as to the latter we are not so sure. There was a look in Eva's eyes which spelt something. She was mentally appraising the other. If she had approved of him

before, she did so more now. He looked all the better for his trip; bronzed, sinewy, hard as nails.

"I hope you had a good time of it," she said rather lamely.

"Oh yes. Quite, thanks," was the almost brusque reply. Then after a moment's pause so as not to seem too brusque, he went on: "And you—if I'm not too curious, what on earth brings you into this part of the country?"

"Oh, I'm trespassing, I know," she answered with a half laugh.

Averno frowned and made an impatient gesture. She went on—

"Well, the explanation is that I'm staying close here."

He looked astonished.

"Really? I didn't know you had any acquaintance in these parts. May I ask where?"

"Certainly. I'm staying at Derringham with the Fanshawes."

"Sorry for you, then, for of all the bores the Fanshawes would take first prize."

"Well, they're very nice to me," with a touch of defiance, "and that's all I have to do with it."

"H'm! No accounting for tastes. Well, it was very nice of you to come and pay me a call. I appreciate it."

Eva tried to look indignant and very nearly succeeded.

"Didn't I say just now," she answered, "that I thought you were away in Africa. No, to be serious, I remembered this beautiful way round the woods here, and thought I'd like to see it again."

"Will you come up to the house?"

"No, thanks. I'll just take this walk round if I may?"

"Certainly. Come along, then."

There was something familiar about this phrase and the way in which it was uttered. It brought back that morning after her arrival here, the best part of a year ago, uttered on this very spot. Now he turned to lead the way exactly as he had done then. Eva felt puzzled. Should she hint to him that she had not come over here to go for a walk with him, and, in short, that she would rather have his room than his company? But at that moment she was not quite sure that she would. He had treated her with abominable rudeness, had taken himself off in a huff, and had never apologized, or communicated with her since. At the same time, the idea of Averno apologizing struck her as about on all-fours with that of Averno playing a tin whistle in the street. Well, there was no harm in it for once, so she followed him obediently. By way of further emphasizing recollection—association—Stirrup had all this time been whining and tail-wagging, and jumping up to her, by way of claiming his share of recognition.

Now this situation was an extremely awkward

one. Here were two people who had parted on sufficiently bad terms as to bring to the mind of each that they had made a mistake in ever getting upon terms which would warrant their spending the rest of their lives together. Now here they were thrown together, by sheer accident, on the very spot on which they had begun to get really acquainted. Perhaps it is scarcely curious that each should be furtively wondering whether the mistake had not lain in getting off those terms.

Down along the same woodland path they went, with the great tumbling masses of bracken as high as their heads, vivid green now instead of the bronze gold of autumn; but the moist scent of the rich moss was the same, and the ringing tap-tap of the woodpeckers' bills on tree boles on either hand; the harsh screech of the jay too—all brought back that other day three-fourths of a year ago, when they had wandered this woodland way in like fashion together.

It is possible that such influences lay upon both of them. They certainly were not conversational. Very little was said, as they walked side by side, amid the sights and sounds and scents of the moist woodland path, where in time of leafage the sunlight never penetrated. Sound and scent are as subtle agents for conveying associations as sight, and this was brought vividly home to one of them here and now. The other was thinking of what

life had been to him during the forty-eight hours which had gone by since his return to his now solitary home.

Eva was the first to break the silence.

"How different it looks to-day," she began, rather feebly. "And yet in some ways it doesn't."

"Yes, greener," he answered. "You don't get the variety of bronze and gold you did then. Look! You remember that ash over there by the decoy? It was vivid yellow then, and look at it now."

The same eye for natural detail as ever—we dare not swear that the listener's heart did not tighten, going over this same ground; the familiar surroundings and the unparalleled beauty of them had begun to soften her—she had at no time felt very hardened towards the man who now talked at her side. She found herself stealing little furtive glances up at him when he would be just a trifle on ahead, and so not able to see them. In truth, a very whirlwind of regret was coming over her. Why had she been so hasty to take offence? She had given ground for grievance, and pride and temper had done the rest.

And he?

Many an hour, in light and darkness, had he spent in those solemn woods; and their solitude and his own had seemed to bring out psychic forces in him. He had recently conjured up the vision

of this girl standing on that very spot, so distinct that her presence seemed to have materialized there barely half an hour before actually finding her there. What did it mean? Was it an indication? Of a truth the atmosphere was becoming more and more charged.

It may or may not be strange that to neither of these two came any inclination to indulge in ordinary talk; for instance after somewhat of an absence, Averno made no inquiries as to the other's relatives or what she had been doing meanwhile, and so forth. She, for her part, volunteered none. An overwhelming influence seemed to overshadow the pair, rendering even most ordinary conversation distasteful; and yet neither felt bored, neither constrained. Strange, wasn't it?

They wandered on, automatically as it were, following exactly the same way they had followed on that first day. A turn in the wood ride and there was light in front. Beyond lay the open fields, and between this and them, standing at the very end of the ride, rose the tarred shed. Averno stopped. There was something in the sight of the wretched shack that "got upon" him.

"Shall we go and explore it again?" suggested Eva.

"No. I've come to the conclusion I don't like that sort of thing, it's apt to grow on one. I had a beastly experience of the kind since I was here last. That sort of thing is best left alone."

His tone was so short, so almost troubled, that she looked up astonished.

"Won't you tell it me?" she said.

"Some day perhaps, some day," he answered, still shortly, and then changed the subject by pointing out some vista through the tree stems.

But the answer he had made had gone to the listener's heart with a thrill. What did he mean by "some day"? She had supposed that on their return from this strange walk they would simply bid each other the conventional goodbye and drop out of one another's lives, but that answer seemed to convey that such was not going to be the case. And then she knew herself, knew that she had made the mistake of her life when she had given way to pride and temper the best part of a year ago, and practically sent this man from her. This unexpected meeting, this new propinquity, had brought it all back tenfold. She would have given anything to have blotted out that one day, and now it was too late. Yet, was it? Else why that answer "some day"? Well, it was plain enough. They might meet again as ordinary acquaintances.

They walked on down a ride at right angles to that which they had been following. Soon it brought them out on the mere. The smaller water-fowl babbled and chattered among the rushes, and the air vibrated with the drumming of a couple

of snipe indulging in their strange *vol plané* flight high overhead. Already the sheet of water, dotted with its little reed islands, was taking on just a tinge of pink, for the sun was beginning to droop to a line of summer clouds which fringed the western skyline.

"Let's sit and rest a minute," he suggested. "Here's a seat of sorts." There was an old punt house standing close by the waterside, and a rough bench ran half the length of this. They sat down, facing the length of the now crimsoning mere.

"Take care!" he warned with a quick hand under her elbow. "You were about to sit down on the rotten end of the plank."

"Thanks," she said.

But as he raised her, his glance fell on something It was a brooch that she was wearing, a little gold enamel monogram brooch.

"Got two names?" he asked, more abruptly than he had spoken yet.

"Yes," she answered wonderingly. "Estelle's my second. Hermione gave me that little thing years ago. Why, what's the matter?"

His face had gone as pale as its bronze would allow. He stared out almost wildly over the mere, then at her, then over the mere again. For the surface of the latter had gone well-nigh blood red, reflecting the flame red glow of the sinking sun focussed through the bank of summer clouds, as

the flash of new-born revelation swept over him. It was marvellous.

"But—what is it?" she repeated anxiously. He didn't answer. He took an envelope out of his pocket and began pencilling something on the back. This was what he wrote—

"Eventide. 25. $\frac{e}{e}$. Red sunset. Wood and water. Renewal."

Then he handed it to her.

"But what on earth does this mean?" she asked wonderingly. "What is it a quotation from?"

"I'll tell you afterwards. It's a cryptogram. I found it in an old book in my library, and that monogram brooch of yours gave me the key."

"Well, but read it," she urged eagerly. "What does it mean?"

"It means that—— Well—listen, and see how it fits.

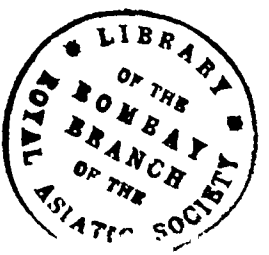
"*Eventide* = 'At eventide there shall be light.' '25' = your own age. '$\frac{e}{e}$' = 'Eva Estelle.' '*Red sunset*'—Look," breaking off suddenly to point to the blood-red surface of the mere and the flaming sky. "'*Wood and water*'—Look again. '*Renewal*' = that we have made the mistake of our lives, but that there is no need to continue making it. What do you say?"

The dark lustrous eyes had been fixed upon his, and Averno saw that they were brimming. She

put forth to him a hand which trembled. He took it. He also took—her.

" I suspected that those were ' words of power,' " he said—after an interval. " And—they are."

THE END



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